

WHAT'S NEXT?

**REDEFINING CHURCH IN
THE POST-QUARANTINE ERA**

by Christina Colón

**RECAPTURING A MORAL VISION
FOR A THRIVING SOCIETY**

by Adam Russell Taylor

**RECKONING WITH THE PAST
TO MOVE FORWARD ON RACE**

by Colleen Murphy





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The Power of Interdependence

The African philosophy of *ubuntu* points the way to a thriving society.

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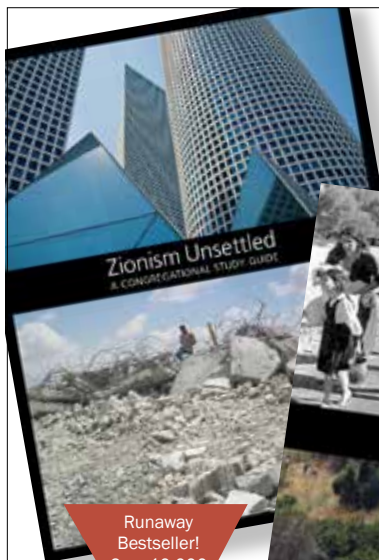
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From the Editor

As we worked on the three feature articles in this issue, a common theme became clear: Each of the authors, in distinctive ways and from varied points of view, was grappling with related questions:

How do we take the next steps in constructing a more just church and society? What models can help guide us as we go about the work of building something new?

In an excerpt from his new book *A More Perfect Union*, Sojourners President Adam Russell Taylor looks to the southern African philosophy of *ubuntu*—interdependence—as offering wisdom that goes far beyond one-on-one relationships to a paragon for society itself. Colleen Murphy, a law professor in Illinois and an expert in issues of transitional justice, explains why making progress on racial justice requires facing the hard realities of our past. And associate editor Christina Colón talked with pastors about how their churches will be different as they enter the post-quarantine era. In their own unique ways, each author is wrestling—as all of us are called to do—with questions of what it means to put our faith into action in an uncertain world.

RESPONSE

A More Inclusive Coffee Hour

"There are no wayward thoughts in meditation," Kate Butler [✉](#) wrote in response to "A Thousand Opportunities to Return to God" (by Julia Alvarez, July 2021). Kathleen Plitt Skidmore [✉](#) agreed, adding that Saint Teresa of Ávila compared stray thoughts to "little critters scurrying about, getting underfoot." In "Just Don't Make Me Pass the Peace" (July 2021), Jenna Barnett admits that Zoom church has been a welcome relief from church small talk. Judith MacKay Dahlen [✉](#) responded, saying she has enjoyed "posting comments [and] greeting others online," and added that she has found Zoom coffee hour "to be more inclusive." But reader Andrea Kaitany [✉](#) said she misses "the physical sensation of being surrounded" by her church family. "Not everyone who is socially anxious prefers online church," she notes.

Write us: response@sojo.net



"POETRY IS A POLITICAL ACT BECAUSE IT INVOLVES TELLING THE TRUTH."

June Jordan
Poet, educator, activist

CONTRIBUTING



Allyson McKinney Timm

"I became involved in international human rights law really as an outgrowth of my faith," said Allyson McKinney Timm (p. 12), executive director of Justice Revival. Volunteering for the United Nations Rwanda war crimes tribunal in the early 2000s launched her into a life dedicated to human rights and prompted her to obtain a divinity degree. "I know this is work that we can only do through the help of the Spirit," she said. "The call to justice is so massive, but we know if we are abiding in God and God in us, that gives us the strength to continue."



Colleen Murphy

Growing up in the "Chicagoland Irish American community" sparked Colleen Murphy's (p. 26) interest in Northern Ireland and transitional justice. Now a professor of law at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Murphy writes on the philosophy of transitional justice and the "moral weight" it carries—and her faith has influenced her approach. "I went to Catholic schools for 16 years ... that shaped my interest in how ideas like reconciliation were invoked in different contexts."

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2.6 billion

Amount in dollars that Zoom earned in 2020, up from \$623 million in 2019

100 hours

Length of the world's longest Zoom—a rabbinical gathering—in November 2020

54%

Americans who reported in mid-2020 being "very satisfied" with online religious services

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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HEARTS & MINDS

BY JIM WALLIS

THANK YOU FOR
50 YEARS

As I say farewell to Sojourners, one word comes most to mind: gratitude. I feel deeply grateful for the past and very excited about the future. The love of my life and my vocation for more than 50 years has been centered on two other words: faith and justice. Therefore, it is a great joy—a dream, really—to take this big step into the next chapter of my life and vocation and be wonderfully invited into two new roles focused on both of those core words.

I have accepted an invitation from Georgetown University to become the inaugural Chair in Faith and Justice at the McCourt School of Public Policy and the founding director of the new Center on Faith and Justice. In these new positions, I will be able to focus on the things I most love: teaching and mentoring, writing and speaking, offering me-

MY VOCATION FOR 50 YEARS HAS CENTERED ON TWO WORDS: FAITH AND JUSTICE.

“RECENT THREATS TO DEMOCRACY ARE NOT JUST POLITICAL ISSUES—THEY ARE TESTS OF FAITH.”

dia commentary, convening and strategizing with both faith and political leaders across the theological and ideological spectrums, engaging in outreach to both policy makers and local practitioners, helping to change the narrative of faith and politics, and being an advocate for justice—all because of my faith. It is an incredible gift.

I am deeply thankful for the last 50 years with Sojourners; I am honored to be its founder (which I always say was more like a co-founder, along with many others) and will remain an ambassador of this unique organization going forward. And I could not be more supportive of Adam Russell Taylor, my successor as president of Sojourners. After three years of planning—and with my full endorsement—the board chose Adam to be my successor. He is a dynamic, new-generation thinker, activist, messenger, and

mobilizer who is ready to lead Sojourners into the next 50 years of its prophetic ministry.

I'll continue my vocation at Georgetown, where I have taught a course called “Faith, Race, and Politics” for nearly a decade. The issues of justice run deep; none are more important than the recent threats to democracy in America and around the world. These are not just political issues—they are tests of faith. The spirituality of democracy and the soul of the nation will be core to the work of this new center. Our key programmatic areas will be racism, poverty, peace, and justice—in all their religious, moral, personal, and systematic dimensions. We will teach and learn prophetic politics with the perseverance that comes from a long-term commitment to change and with the patience to act, wait and see, then act again with faithful persistence.

I have often told folks that Sojourners' legacy would not be the things that we have accomplished as a community, publication, or organization but rather what we inspired others to do, including the changes they made in their lives, churches, communities, and movements. Of course, I want to stay connected to as many of you as I can; you can find my new contact information on Georgetown's website. I look forward to this new chapter of my vocation and ministry, but I will always support Sojourners and will continue to be shaped for the rest of my life by its mission. ✱

A version of this appeared previously on sojo.net.



Jim Wallis, a founder of Sojourners, became Georgetown University's inaugural chair in faith and justice on July 1, 2021.

Prophetic Poetry from the Voices of the Marginalized

In this dynamic collection of poems, Drew Jackson retells the first eight chapters of Luke's Gospel from his own Black Christian perspective, proclaiming the gospel story in all its liberative power.

*But God speaks through wombs,
birthing prophetic utterances. . . .
Enough of this unbelieving religion
that masquerades as faith.
Divine favor is placed on what we
have disgraced.*



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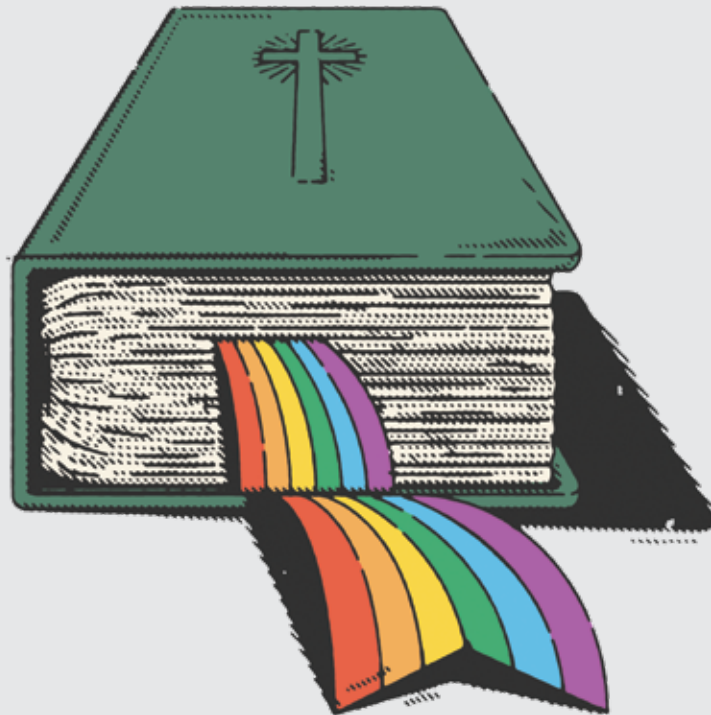
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NO JUSTICE WITHOUT LOVE

Squaring religious freedom with LGBTQ inclusion.



2

In June, the Supreme Court held that a Catholic agency can exclude same-sex couples from its government-contracted foster care program, despite a city policy banning LGBTQ discrimination. Assertions of religious freedom carried the day in the narrow ruling of *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*; at the same time, broader precedent remains, requiring religious groups to respect generally applicable anti-discrimination laws. The court deferred the deeper challenge of how to square vigorous claims of religious liberty with hopes of inclusion for LGBTQ people.

As people of faith, how do we make sense of these competing claims—for equality and nondiscrimination, bedrock human rights principles, and for religious freedom? For guidance, Christians can look to our own record on religious freedom, theological insight on human rights, and, above all, the ethics of Jesus and Paul.

Let's begin by affirming that religious freedom deserves its place in the inner sanctum of basic rights. It is a hope that once emboldened persecuted communities to flee Europe and

helped inspire the allied struggle against fascism. It remains indispensable for religious minorities the world over—like the Iranian Christian seminary student who fears grave persecution, or Sikh and Jewish communities suffering violence in this country.

As an American Christian, I have never faced religious persecution, but returning to church this spring after 15 months of pandemic restrictions reminded me how sacred is our liberty to worship. I did not feel whole when I couldn't hear words of scripture professed in community and elevated in song. The service touched a profound need, and the tears flowed.

Perhaps it's no surprise that Christians were leading proponents of religious freedom at the United Nations' founding. Dr. O. Frederick Nolde championed the transatlantic ecumenical movement for global human rights protection, convinced, as Kolten Ellis writes, that religious liberty was inseparable from a "holistic bundle of human rights, all of which flowed from a Christian social ethic."

Ironically, though, theological debates arose last century regarding the propriety of rights-based frameworks for Christians. Some claim individual rights constitute an egoistic approach that cannot be squared with a Christian view of life lived in relationship. Others, as Nicholas Wolterstorff observes, argue that "We should not be talking about rights; we should be talking about love."

Religious rights may be a case in point. In *Christian Human Rights*, Yale historian Samuel Moyn explains how religious freedom was used from the outset primarily to protect European Protestants against one another, rather than to extend liberty to others. In this country, religious freedom has been wielded in ways that reinforce Christian and white privilege. Observing that U.S. religious freedom now works as "a privileged weapon of the religious right," Moyn wonders: "Is it possible that the norm is poisoned at the root?"

We should neither dismiss nor champion religious freedom (and human rights) without carefully considering how they (and we) might be redeemed. Scripture proclaims that our noble purposes are only as righteous as the spirit we bring to them. Paul says if we are to do anything—however benevolent or miraculous—it is only pleasing to God if done in love (1 Corinthians

"IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THE NORM IS POISONED AT THE ROOT?"

13:1-3). Paul recalls Jesus' emphasis on love as the sum of the law and the gospel (Luke 10:25-28). This biblical imperative is our beacon in the fog of conflicting rights claims. For the Christian advocate, an ethic of neighbor love must inform the way we assert our own rights and the regard we afford the rights of others.

If the thought of rights used selfishly or at cross-purposes with love has prompted some theologians to urge abandoning them altogether, this should caution Christians against pressing to maximize religious claims at the expense of the marginalized.

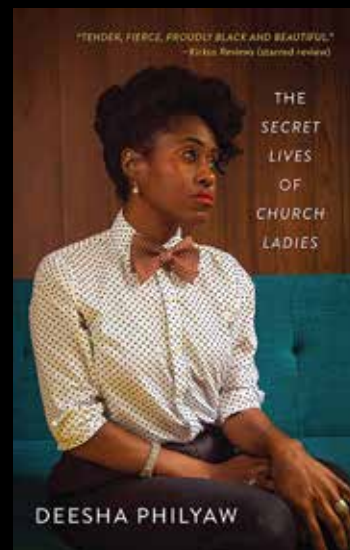
Religious freedom clearly encompasses vital core practices of our faith: discerning and proclaiming our beliefs, worshiping in community, honoring sacred rituals. In all these areas, the U.S. provides formidable safeguards. We saw this during the pandemic, when the Supreme Court pushed back restrictions on houses of worship.

Less compelling are claims to use taxpayer support for a program many desire (like foster care), yet offer services selectively. Harder still to justify are attempts to turn away LGBTQ people from housing, employment, or public establishments—essential life goods. However sincere the religious beliefs that underlie such exclusion, its logical result (when evangelized, in particular) is grievous harm.

If we take Christian love seriously where rights are concerned, we may even prefer to suffer for those long shunned, rather than insist on vindicating our own beliefs. There is, for the faithful, a fate worse than being a victim of a rights violation, and that is being a perpetrator. ♦

Allyson McKinney Timm, a human rights lawyer, is founder and executive director of Justice Revival.

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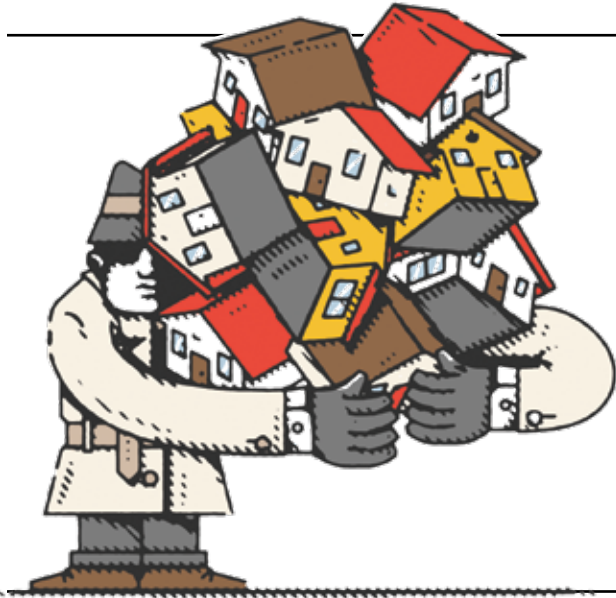
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SOJOURNERS

COMMENTARY

BY CHUCK COLLINS



WHO IS BUYING MY NEIGHBORHOOD?

Anonymous corporations own more and more of our cities.

Invisible forces are disrupting housing markets in most metropolitan areas, fueling the most acute housing crisis in a generation. As pandemic protections are lifted, many communities are anticipating waves of evictions and foreclosures. By one estimate, the U.S. has a shortage of more than 5.5 million units of housing.

Among these invisible forces is an explosion in short-term rentals, a shift to corporate ownership of rental housing, and a plague of global billionaires looking to park money in U.S. real estate markets. Put this on top of inequality-fueled gentrification and many cities have a full-blown affordability and supply crisis.

In some communities, thousands of apartments and homes are being snatched up by anonymous corporations. Now a growing number of community leaders are pressing to know: Who is buying our cities?

The last decade has seen a dramatic shift in the ownership of rental housing, from local ownership to Wall Street corporate ownership. Today, anonymous shell companies own 40 percent of the rental housing market, an estimated 18 million out of 48 million rental units nationwide. Some of this is being used for short-term rentals, like Airbnb. But corporate ownership is also moving into the single-family home market in neighborhoods that were once largely owner-occupied. Global investors—some with illicit funds—find anonymously owned U.S. real estate to be an attractive destination for parking cash. In major urban areas, thousands of apartments are vacant, serving as investor wealth storage units instead of housing.

The Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, an arm of the Treasury Department, has been working to monitor the use of illicit funds in real estate. But it maintains a private database that is not available to local policymakers or affordable housing advocates. To get a clearer picture of who is buying their communities, some cities and states are requiring ownership disclosure. They advocate for public registry of what is called the true “beneficial owners.” Attorney Robert Nessen explained to me, “What if the identities of these beneficial owners had to be recorded on the public record in order to allow these beneficiaries to have any legal rights?” In other words, to have legal standing, you need to tell us who you really are. Public disclosure could be implemented on a city, county, or state-by-state basis. Local lawmakers in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia have passed real estate disclosure laws. New York State passed legislation in 2019 to require the disclosure of real owners and the creation of a public registry. “Neighbors have a fundamental right to know who owns the home next-door to them,” said lead sponsor Sen. James Skoufis. A few months later, however, the real estate industry mobilized to prevent the registry from being made public.

In October 2020, the Los Angeles City Council unanimously voted to direct the city attorney to make recommendations for public disclosure of ownership in LA. Councilmember Mike Bonin wrote that action was required to “curb [the] predatory forces that contribute to eviction, gentrification, and the loss of affordable housing.” A month later, LA County introduced a similar motion. “This motion will provide us with better data so that we can distinguish between corporate investors and mom and pop landlords as we develop safeguards for renters at risk of losing their homes and address our affordable housing crisis,” said LA County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl.

The possibility of dozens of major U.S. cities requiring public disclosure of real owners would boost the movement for real estate transparency and put pressure on national policymakers. Cities could pass laws aimed at curbing vacancies and taxing luxury real estate transfers to fund permanently affordable housing. Knowing who is buying up the block is the first step. ♦

Chuck Collins, author of *The Wealth Hoarders: How Billionaires Spend Millions to Hide Trillions*, directs the program on inequality at the Institute for Policy Studies, where he coedits Inequality.org.

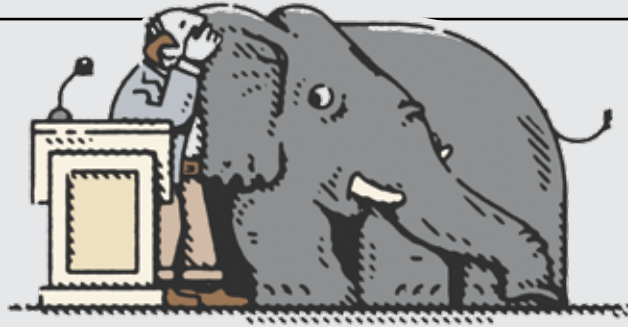
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The Southern Baptist Convention has long been a bellwether for conservative politics. At its annual gathering, controversial resolutions often forecast the upcoming battles of our nation's culture wars. For too many in the denomination, soul competency has given way to partisan loyalty. This transformation began in 1979 when Paul Pressler and Paige Patterson launched an unprecedented, highly orchestrated campaign to persuade members to vote for a fundamentalist SBC president, who then began a cascade of fundamentalist appointments at every level of the denomination. Being "moderate" on abortion, gender roles, and gay rights, among other issues, became deal breakers. Those who found themselves on the outs with fundamentalist extremists were, as they have described, exiled.

Gendered hierarchies are fertile ground for sexual abuse, and in 2018 Patterson was fired as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary for mishandling sexual assault investigations. The toppling of this fundamentalist leader reverberated through the SBC, and a growing chorus of voices, most notably former member Beth Moore, called on the denomination to address this issue as well as restrictions placed on women in ministry. And the politicization of critical race theory, which David Theo Goldberg of the *Boston Review* called the "weaponization of colorblindness," also perched high on the SBC agenda. Both issues figured prominently in the choice of a new SBC president this spring.

Candidate Ed Litton of Alabama conceded that there should be conversations about structural racism and investigations into the denomination's handling of sexual abuse, while Mike Stone of Georgia doubled down on the fundamentalist position

WHERE THERE'S A WILL ...



championed for years by Patterson and his acolytes. Thus, the 2021 election of the SBC president was seen as a referendum not only on these issues, but also on the Trumpian politics of political extremism and absolutism that underscore them. Stone took an early lead in the voting, which signaled to many observers that the bond between the SBC and Trump's Republican Party would prove unbreakable. Moderates breathed a sigh of relief when Litton emerged as the winner; headlines noted that the SBC had pushed back against the denomination's version of Trump extremism.

Undoubtedly, the issues that dominated the 2021 SBC will also be prominent in the 2022 and 2024 Republican primaries. However, the optimism accompanying this victory for (slight) moderation is both misplaced and instructive.

First, a warning: The vast majority of Republican primaries, particularly presidential primaries in Southern states, function as "winner-take-most" elections. The candidate who receives the most votes in a state Republican primary receives most of the state's delegates to the Republican National Convention. There are no runoffs. In 2016, for example, in the 11 states of the former Confederacy, Trump only won an average of 37.3 percent of the primary vote, but was awarded 56.2 percent of the delegates.

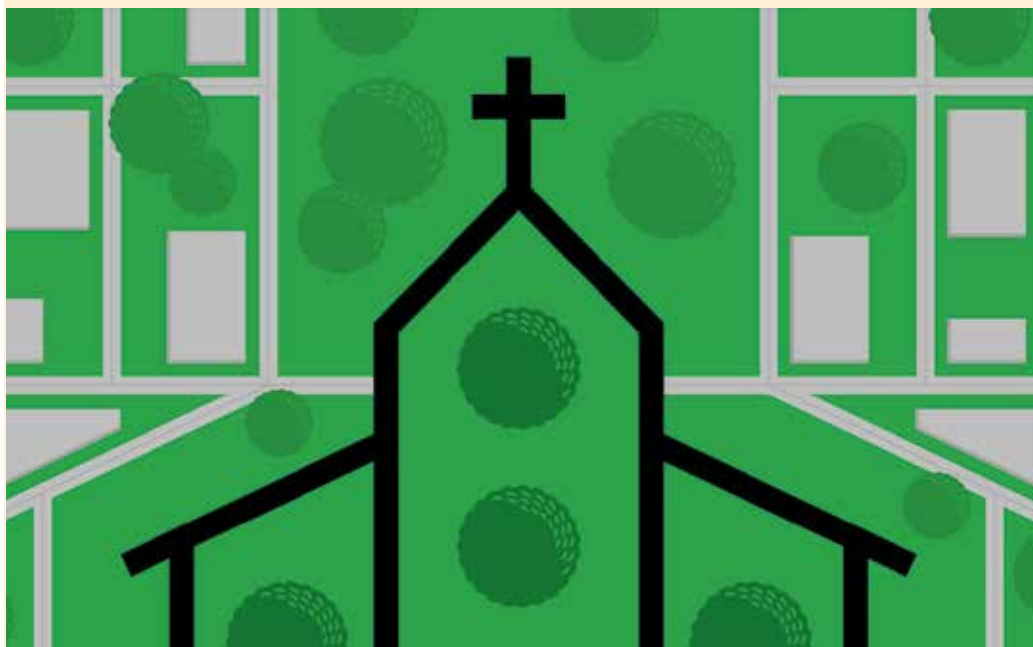
Second, a lesson: To defeat a political extremist, more-moderate voters must organize around a single candidate. When a simple plurality is all that is necessary to win most of a state's delegates, building an anti-extremist coalition in advance is the only path to victory. The 2021 SBC election suggests there is a degree of will; the question is whether moderate voices can find a way. ♦

**THE ISSUES THAT
DOMINATED THE
2021 SBC WILL ALSO
BE PROMINENT IN
THE 2022 AND 2024
REPUBLICAN
PRIMARIES.**

Angie Maxwell is the Diane D. Blair Endowed Chair in Southern Studies and an associate professor of political science at the University of Arkansas.

YET, FAITH CONTINUES

3



Back in February, I volunteered to drop off Lenten kits to members of the church I started attending several months earlier. Being relatively new to the city and congregation, having recently moved to the area, I was unfamiliar with most of the people on my list, as well as the neighborhoods, street names, apartment complexes, and long-term care facility indicating their residences. Assisting with Ash Wednesday before the pandemic might have been a fairly routine way of familiarizing myself with fellow parishioners—one of those innumerable little face-to-face encounters that slowly builds familiarity and trust in a church. This year, of course, there was none of that. My volunteer experience was isolated and individual. Ferrying containers of ashes, devotional booklets, and craft activities to people's doorsteps and mailboxes, I saw no one, save the care facility receptionist.

This almost completely impersonal experience was also the most powerful ecclesial encounter I have had throughout the pandemic—the one that felt most like church.

During the course of COVID-19's restriction of in-person worship, I went inside a church only a handful of times. Once to say goodbye to the congregation I left when I moved from Washington, D.C.; once to get

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ordained in my hometown; twice to pick up liturgical kits at the church I started attending in my new city; and once to guest preach at this church, standing inside a sealed pulpit and preaching to a mostly empty sanctuary. All visits, except for the kit pick-ups, were livestreamed. I initially thought that being back inside a church after a forced separation would be some awe-inspiring faith moment—like coming home to God. What my experience this year taught me is that we never truly left. It sounds cliché, and maybe a bit untrue—after all, though the church is the body of Christ, the people and not the four walls, Zoom is *not* people. Virtual is just that: virtual. But that difference is precisely what I experienced when making Lenten deliveries. Driving to people's homes, walking along their streets, encountering new neighborhoods (or rediscovering old ones, as I did upon realizing that people whose names I had seen only on screen were around the corner from me)—with each delivery, I felt like I was drawing invisible lines of connection between my residence and those of my fellow church members, my body and their bodies, locating us together in the world for the first time. It felt like communion.

While each moment inside a sanctuary this year was memorable and meaningful, it was outside of church where I found the body of Christ. Church went with us because that is where it lives. Not on Zoom, or on the technological platform du jour, but with us.

Looking to the stories of my cultural and religious ancestors, I see this truth lived out. Spiritual displacement is more common than not. In fact, it is more a defining thread linking me with those who came before than an aberration disrupting my lineage. Yet, faith continues. Our collective and individual histories—long tales of us seeking God—are also accounts of us finding one another, and God finding us there, too. ✕

Jeania Ree V. Moore is a writer, United Methodist deacon, and doctoral student in religious studies and African American studies at Yale University.

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DEEP ECONOMY

BY BILL MCKIBBEN

THE ANCIENT AND THE NEW

WILL THEIR COMBINED CRY BE ENOUGH TO VANQUISH THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM THAT WE MUST FOREVER GROW OUR ECONOMIES?



I

It's always an honor to be invited to help with someone's good work—to be a guest in their house, especially when that house is as big as all outdoors.

Early in the summer, the Indigenous groups that had been leading the fight against the proposed Line 3 tar sands pipeline in northern Minnesota asked everyone to join them. Freed by the vaccine to travel, many of us took up the offer; it was my first journey since lockdown. And so we gathered on the banks of the Mississippi—so far up the great river that you could, in fact, hop from one bank to the other. There were two big protests on the same June morning; one, at a pumping station, ended in hundreds of arrests of brave activists and real aggression from the police, who buzzed demonstrators repeatedly in a helicopter that kicked up choking clouds of dirt. I was about 20 miles away, and our protest was much more peaceful—indeed, it was mostly spiritual.

Its leaders were a series of Native elders. Along a usually deserted county road, several thousand of us mustered to listen to a water and pipe ceremony led by a pair of Anishinaabe women; it was a hot day, and the drone of their voices against the beat of drums both lulled and emboldened. Soon, a few of us struck out across a marsh, past signs de-

claring that we were trespassing, aiming for a wooden road that the pipeline company had built across the swamp to carry its equipment. We gained it, and soon there was an occupation underway—tents going up, people making plans for sanitation and food supply and security. But mostly there was prayer and ceremony: Within hours a sacred fire had been lit, and five days of ceremony were underway.

One never knows precisely how to react to religious services not of one's own tradition. Reverence, obviously. But what to make of rituals where you don't understand the words, and where even if you did, they are not intended for you? I don't find it useful to try to translate into my own tradition, figuring out how they parallel Christian rites. Instead, I try to let it wash through me—which is easier, I find, outdoors. We were in a swamp, with thousands of dragonflies circling in the June heat (Minnesota was setting new temperature records that week). Dragonflies are among the most antique of creatures, their lineage dating back 350 million years to the Carboniferous. So, against that standard, these Native prayers were very new. But against most human history, they were ancient—and to realize how well that oldest of human wisdom traditions syncs with the newest always comforts me. We were here, after all, in part because scientists working supercomputers and satellites were warning that we faced a crisis unless we changed fast. Their message resonated with the chants ringing out across the marsh, and indeed with the darting dragonflies.

Will their combined cry be enough to vanquish the conventional wisdom of our time, the idea that we must forever grow our economies? Let us devoutly hope. ♦

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, is the author most recently of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*

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SOJOURNERS

EYEWITNESS

4

**“EURO-CHRISTIAN
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 THAT YOUR
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RECKONING WITH GENOCIDE

"Two-hundred-fifteen children were buried in unmarked graves at Kamloops Residential School in British Columbia—that was just the first. We're going to see this repeated across the continent from the Arctic North down to the Rio Grande. It's not over. It's just starting.

The boarding schools—what they call residential schools in Canada—were a state-planned part of the genocide of the American Indians. They were a way of removing an obstacle to getting the land and the resources. The boarding schools were part of the intentional destruction of the American Indian worldview [to give rise to] the Euro-Christian worldview of radical individualism, of private ownership, of hierarchy.

Private ownership of land is considered a fundamental human right to Euro-Christians. What good does that do for Indians, who want to honor the Earth as a close relative—as a mother, a grandmother? It was always, first of all, about the land, and still is today as we see pipeline after pipeline in Canada and the U.S.

When I read Facebook and the responses of liberal, white, Euro-Christian people to these revelations, I see a proliferation of teary-eyed emojis: sadness. Screw sadness! Euro-Christian people should be mad as hell that your privilege, power, and ownership of land on this continent is rooted in those children dying that way and being buried by the missionaries or by government officials in government schools without even notifying the parents, because [those children] were not yet considered human until converted to Christianity.

The churches were part of the political system from the very beginning and the churches need to change the political system now. A variety of denominations in the past 20 years took action to disavow the Doctrine of Discovery. How much land did Indians get back? What did it accomplish? That's only a tiny first step. It's time to roll up your sleeves and go to work." ❖

George "Tink" Tinker is professor emeritus at Iliff School of Theology in Denver and a member of the Osage Nation. He spoke with Sojourners' Jenna Barnett.



THE POWER OF INTERDEPENDENCE

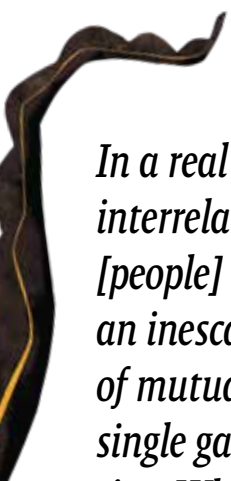


*The African philosophy of ubuntu
points the way to a thriving society.*

*An excerpt from a new book
by Adam Russell Taylor*

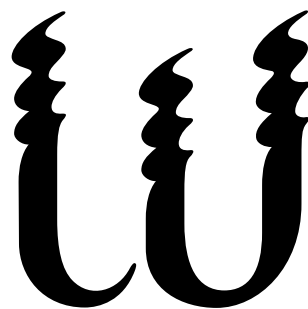
*Illustrations by
Thiago Limón*





In a real sense all life is interrelated. All [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. ... This is the interrelated structure of reality.

—Martin Luther King Jr.



When I studied abroad in South Africa in 1996, I learned much about the power of interdependence and mutuality. There I encountered and experienced the southern-African philosophy of *ubuntu*. Through Nelson Mandela's moral leadership and embodiment of *ubuntu*, the nation was led through transformational change. Like Dr. King, Mandela refused to hate his enemies, including those who kept him imprisoned for 27 years, as he envisioned a future South Africa that included Black and white together.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu summarized *ubuntu* in what became a marker of both a movement and a philosophy: "I am because we are." Mpyana Fulgence Nyengele, author of *Cultivating Ubuntu*, offers this definition: "Ubuntu is the substance and core being of a person and speaks particularly about the fact that we cannot be fully formed as human beings in isolation." Rather, as Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Baker share in *Another Way*, Nyengele explains that "it is only through our communal participation and interaction with other people that we begin to develop trust, compassion, caring, humility, kindness, and forgiveness, which are all qualities of what it means to be human and humane toward others. Similar to the fruit of the spirit, *ubuntu* is possible because *ntu* or Spirit 'orients persons toward life-giving choices, actions and behaviors.' ... Therefore, 'ubuntu promotes and enhances the abundance of human life in community and beyond.'"

I think of *ubuntu* as an expanded, vivid version of the Golden Rule: We are called to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Or, as King so often put it, we are to be "our brothers' and sisters' keeper."

Interdependence is not often considered a cornerstone of the American ethos, but it lies at the heart of what binds us together, in both a moral and a practical sense. It constitutes an essential beatitude of building the Beloved Community. A greater understand-

ing of how our lives are inextricably linked opens up new possibilities for developing empathy toward others and helps us counteract the atomized, overly individualistic excesses of American culture. *Ubuntu* also provides a needed lens to understand the ways in which all parts of the globe have become increasingly interdependent. Both our security and our prosperity are increasingly tied to the rest of the world. Global crises such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic require shared global leadership and cooperation.

The Beloved Community requires deepening our sense of interdependence. It involves a deeper appreciation that we are in this together socially, politically, and economically. *Ubuntu* interdependence forms the basis of expressions of solidarity and helps individuals and communities move beyond naked self-interest and hyper-individualism. Properly understood and practiced, *ubuntu* interdependence provides a compelling rationale behind many public-policy commitments that are central to promoting the common good, such as a strong and effective social safety net, universal access to good health care, strengthening families so they can thrive, and ensuring that every child has access to a quality education.

This kind of *ubuntu* interdependence provides a social and moral framework. It offers an organizational and governmental policy framework for fighting poverty and expanding economic justice and opportunity for all Americans, including advancing a greater commitment to the triple bottom line of generating benefit for shareholders, employees, and the broader society within the private sector.

South Africa provided the term *ubuntu*, but many other cultures and communities, such as Eastern Christianity and Asian culture, can teach us about the meaning and centrality of interdependent communities. According to Dr. Grace Ji-Sun Kim, "Asian culture is communal. The community and family are more important than the individual. In the communal setting in Korea, one never talks about 'my school' or 'my church'; it is always 'our school' or 'our church,' where they use the Korean word *ouri*. Likewise, one will say 'our husband' or 'our sister' to express the communal culture of society. This communal culture is also connected to *jeong*, a term that refers to the breaking down of the personal in order to build on the connectedness of people." Author and activist Kathy Khang echoed this sentiment as she shared with me, "There's a strong sense of kinship, often



tied to an understanding of jeong, which is difficult to put into words but speaks to an immediate sense of connection and mutual understanding, of being seen.” When Khang considers this in light of the Beloved Community, she imagines “that everyone is your auntie or uncle. In other words, everyone is looking out for you and is in your business, for better or for worse.”

Cultures from across Latin America also share a deep sense of communal interdependence. Rev. Alexia Salvatierra speaks of how collective images are natural in Latin American culture based on the belief that just relationships naturally flow from our taking seriously that we are a family. In this notion of *la familia* is found a deep mutual understanding and commitment to each other, because “a family at its best is a Beloved Community.” Rev. Gabriel Salguero echoes this sentiment, describing la familia as “a radical social construct that shapes how we organize life.”

The Christian tradition is filled with references, stories, and metaphors that speak to this dynamic interdependence. Paul’s metaphor comparing the community of the church to the human body captures the essence of our interdependence. When Paul wrote his letter to the church at Corinth, he understood that its members ministered within a bustling city much like many of our cities today. Corinth was a commercial center of 600,000 people. From the dawn of Greek civilization, it was a strategic maritime port, a crossing of shipping lanes, and a meeting point between East and West. Corinth also earned a reputation for vice, as a place for hedonistic pleasure and ostentatious wealth. Behind this wealth were pervasive and severe poverty and a culture that often neglected the poor. And Corinthian society was so riddled with competitive individualism and disregard for the poor that this sensibility spilled over into the church, where feuding groups were built around the personalities and teachings of rival leading figures from different house churches. Instead of creating unity out of their diversity, the Corinthian church experienced division and rancor. Sadly, we see similar polarization today in our faith communities and our nation.

What Paul wrote about the human body—the connectedness of bones and sinews, its fragility and remarkable ability to support the whole—is truly a miracle, one that I’ve come to appreciate more fully in my middle age. I have experienced lower back problems over the past several years. It started when I threw out my back trying

to prevent my son from being hit by a car as we came out of church. It took me three long years of dealing with frequent agonizing pain before I finally relented and signed up for physical therapy. Physical therapy gave me a profound appreciation for the true interdependence of the human body. I learned that to heal my lower back, I had to gain greater flexibility and strength in the muscles that connect to my back, from my hamstrings to my glutes and particularly my core. What is true for healing my back is also true for healing our ailing country.

Paul’s metaphor comparing the church to the functioning of the body is an image that applies to the health of our communities, our nation, and our world. The lesson of the body—interdependence—ties together three realizations and commitments:

- to protect the weakest, most vulnerable members of our society;
- to demonstrate an equal concern for one another; and
- to recognize that our security, our prosperity, and even our wholeness is tied to that of others.

“Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,” Paul comments, adding that “its parts should have equal concern for each other.” Finally, Paul reminds us that “if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Corinthians 12:22, 25–26).

After three years of physical therapy, I became overconfident and lazy. I stopped doing the very exercises that had helped so much and ended up reinjuring my back. The lesson I learned from my back is true for our society. If we stop protecting the most vulnerable among us and showing concern for one another, we will get stuck in a cycle of reinjuring ourselves and others. We will also be more susceptible to a politics that appeals to hate and fear and will retreat into partisan or ideological camps. As a result, embracing ubuntu interdependence is critical for restoring health to our democracy and building the Beloved Community.

There are many threats to our interdependence, including global climate change, which poses a signature challenge to living together on an interdependent planet. Poverty in all its forms and degrees assaults human dignity and represents a great test of our interdependence because, as Mahatma Gandhi said, “poverty is the greatest form of violence.” Dr. King un-

derstood that fighting poverty represented the next chapter, the next frontier, of the civil rights struggle. In his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* King wrote, “The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct, and immediate abolition of poverty.” King’s words offer a searing and prophetic diagnosis of poverty and are as true and relevant today as when they were written more than 50 years ago. The sobering truth is that not nearly enough has changed in the intervening years. King wrote:

We have proceeded from a premise that poverty is a consequence of multiple evils: lack of education, restricting job opportunities; poor housing which stultified home life and suppressed initiative; fragile family relationships which distorted personality development. The logic of this approach suggested that each of these could be attacked one by one. ... At no time has a total, coordinated, and fully adequate program been conceived. As a consequence, fragmentary and spasmodic reforms have failed to reach down to the profoundest needs of the poor.

Fifty years ago, King understood that solutions to poverty will require a comprehensive approach that addresses root causes. Ubuntu interdependence teaches us that our nation’s health is inextricably linked to the thriving of all people. In particular, it teaches us that when the most vulnerable thrive, we all thrive. When one part of America suffers, all parts suffer with it. When one part rejoices, all parts rejoice with it. ✱

Adam Russell Taylor is president of Sojourners. This article is excerpted from *A More Perfect Union: A New Vision for Building the Beloved Community*, by Adam Russell Taylor. Copyright © 2021 Broadleaf Books. Reproduced by permission.



TO TELL THE TRUTH

*Our society can't
move toward a just
future on race until
we face the hard
realities of the past.*

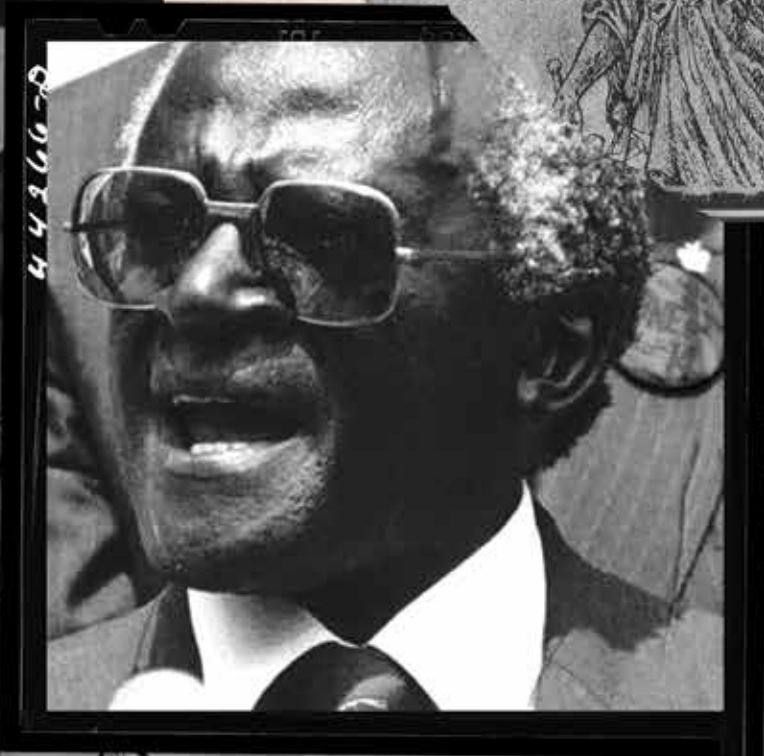
*By Colleen Murphy
Illustrations by
Mark Harris*



ROAD

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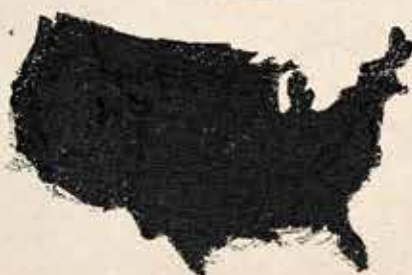
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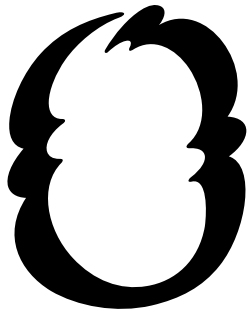


ON.



U T H





On a Sunday morning in Atlanta in April 1899, white churchgoers, dressed in their finest, filled the pews to hear the word of God. As the postlude concluded, the congregants poured out of their houses of worship, bought sandwiches for lunch, and crammed onto trains heading toward Newnan, Ga., to watch the gruesome extrajudicial murder of Sam Hose.

Hose, a 21-year-old Black farmhand, had been pulled off a train by a white mob and was later murdered while thousands watched his lynching. “Sweet Jesus!” Hose was heard to exclaim, and these were believed to be his last words,” writes Philip Dray in *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*.

The relationship between religion and injustice in the United States is complicated. U.S. Christians tend to emphasize the role of Christianity in *contesting* injustice, while forgetting images such as churchgoers going seamlessly from worship to an extrajudicial execution.

In the wake of George Floyd’s murder, the U.S. witnessed the largest protests in our history. This new moment in the long movement for human freedom arises in response to high-profile police and white vigilante killings of Black men and women; it demands an end to police violence and redress for centuries of racial injustice. This “reckoning” has pushed local, state, and national efforts to reform police practices, hold individual police officers accountable for abusive violence, repair the injustice caused by policies such as redlining, and establish the truth about lynching.

As in the past, there has been backlash to this movement, animated predominantly by white Christians. Today, some want to ban discussion of race and racism in classrooms and in church. Then-president Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13950 to remove “divisive concepts”—such as that “the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist”—from all federal literature, contracts, and speech. Critical race theory (CRT), a body of legal scholarship that examines how institu-

tions such as law empirically operate in ways that maintain racial inequality, has become a particular target for the Southern Baptist Convention (as well as for Republicans in several states, such as in Tennessee where Gov. Bill Lee signed a bill banning the teaching of CRT in public schools). In response, some Black pastors publicly severed ties with the Southern Baptist Convention. As pastor Joel Bowman put it, “I can’t sit by and continue to support or even loosely affiliate with an entity that is pitching its tent with white supremacy.”

A BACKGROUND OF INEQUALITY

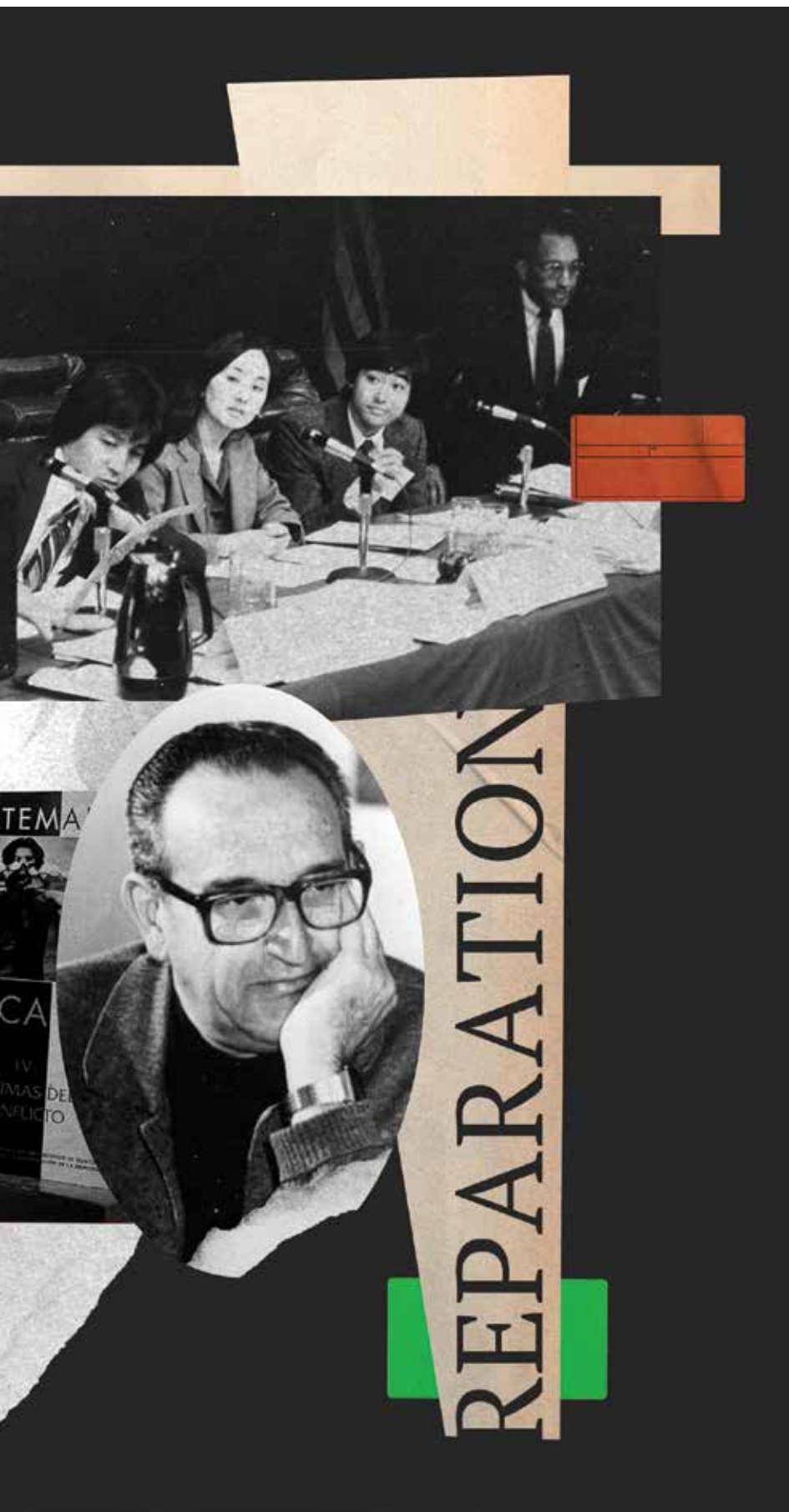
The intersection of religion and race in the United States is complicated. It pulls in opposing directions—revealing deepening divisions in the U.S. as well as countervailing calls for unity.

In this context, efforts led by Rep. Barbara Lee are underway to establish the U.S. Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT, or truth commission) “to properly acknowledge, memorialize, and be a catalyst for progress toward jettisoning the belief in a hierarchy of human value, embracing our common humanity, and permanently eliminating persistent racial inequities.” In an April letter to President Joe Biden, some Christian religious leaders, including from Sojourners, requested an executive order to establish a truth commission to “examine the systems in place that lead to the disenfranchisement and marginalization of Black people and [to] shed light on the legacy of institutional racism and how it continues to impact every aspect of American life.”

The theory and practice known as transitional justice provides invaluable resources on which the truth commission movement can draw. The starting point of transitional justice is that the repair of damaged relationships requires that wrongs be acknowledged and redressed. From the perspective of transitional justice, attempts in the U.S. to silence speech about white supremacy, critical race theory, and systemic racialized abuse are ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. Silence will not end racism or heal the deep divisions and fractures in the United States. Burying history does not remove the impact of historical wrongs on contemporary relations.

In recent decades, more than 40 countries have heeded the central insight of





transitional justice, establishing a wide range of processes to address widespread wrongdoing. Transitional justice was a central part of the transition from communism to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, from apartheid to multiracial democracy in South Africa in 1994, and from conflict to a commitment to peace in 2016 to end more than 50 years of warfare between the Colombian government and the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia.

Processes of transitional justice take many forms. Domestic, international, hybrid, and ad hoc criminal trials have held perpetrators to account for human rights violations. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and a similar tribunal for Rwanda were ad hoc criminal procedures that led to the formation of the now-permanent International Criminal Court.

Truth commissions (official, temporary bodies established to document specified human rights abuses, name perpetrators and victims, and identify both the underlying causes and consequences of such violations) have been used in dozens of countries, including Canada, the Philippines, Morocco, and South Korea.

Material and symbolic reparations have been offered in Malawi, Brazil, and Haiti. In Malawi, for example, the National Compensation Tribunal processed claims for monetary compensation to victims of wrongdoing such as wrongful imprisonment and exile during the autocratic regime from 1961 to 1993. Post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe pursued lustration (or “cleansing”), a process of vetting officials for ties to extremist organizations. In Poland, lustration limited the participation of former communist secret police informants from positions in the successor government and civil service. All are part of transitional justice processes.

By addressing and redressing wrongdoing, transitional justice seeks justice for victims and the transformation of political relationships. To transform relationships is to fundamentally alter how members of a political community interact both with each other and with government officials. Transformation is needed when wrongdoing is widespread, with state officials complicit in (and in some cases perpetrators of) wrongdoing. Widespread wrongdoing characteristically occurs with impunity, which is a product of weak state institutions, the absence of political will to hold perpetrators to account, and/or dis-



By addressing and redressing wrongdoing, transitional justice seeks justice for victims and the transformation of political relationships.

trust of state institutions, which renders them ineffective. Background inequality often results in members of marginalized communities being more vulnerable to wrongdoing, as their rights claims are less recognized and protected.

These features are present in the American context, as police abuse disproportionately targeting Black, brown, and Indigenous people occurs without meaningful accountability and against a background of racialized inequality.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Because it is concerned with the repair of damaged relationships, transitional justice is linked with reconciliation, a fundamental concept for many faith communities. But the reconciliation pursued in political contexts is not identical to theological understandings of what reconciliation entails. Importantly, forgiveness is not a necessary part of the process of repair and transformation that transitional processes pursue. Nor is forgiveness a goal that such processes should aim to facilitate.

Calls to forgive—understood as the forswearing of resentment and anger stemming toward one's wrongdoer—make sense against a background of a valuable and morally defensible relationship. In such relationships, a refusal to forgive can

obstruct the possibility of maintaining a relationship and reflect an individual's failure to recognize his or her own fallibility.

However, when the relationship in question is abusive, forgiveness is less compelling. Urging a victim of domestic violence to forgive, for example, does not address the abusive structure of the interaction, can reflect a failure to take seriously the claims of victims to better treatment, and can implicitly encourage a victim to capitulate to her own abuse.

Transitional justice is pursued where political relationships are abusive. Urging forgiveness in response to widespread wrongdoing can reflect a failure to take seriously the claims of victims and their experiences and may implicitly be asking victims to become complicit in their own oppression. Forgiveness by victims will not address the underlying social and institutional conditions that made widespread human rights abuses possible. Yet it is precisely those conditions, and the broader structure of political interaction, that are the root problem and must change.

The repair and transformation that transitional justice requires is built on five pillars: truth, justice, reparations, nonrecurrence, and memorialization. Importantly, transitional justice requires the pursuit of all five together. For example, truth is no substitute for justice. Repara-

tion will not by itself ensure conditions for nonrecurrence.

Truth: Documenting and acknowledging the occurrence of human rights violations, their consequences for victims, responsibility for them, and conditions that facilitated their occurrence is necessary. There is a basic right to such truth, and this information provides the foundation for understanding what must change to prevent wrongdoing in the future.

Justice: Holding perpetrators to account for wrongdoing matters for its own sake and contributes to institutional reform efforts by underscoring that no individual is above the law. Respect for human rights is binding on all members.

Reparation: The harm victims experienced has a moral claim to repair. The sources of harm are multiple: not only the material and physical losses suffered, but also the harm stemming from the denial of the respectful treatment that victims merit. Through redress, communities acknowledge that victims are members of the political community and rights holders.

Nonrecurrence: It's essential to alter the underlying social and institutional conditions that explain how wrongdoing became widespread. One common condition is the absence of the rule of law due to corruption or politicization of the judiciary and impunity for abuses by police or security agents.

Memorialization: This “fifth pillar of transitional justice” requires communities to commit to remembering the past, including past atrocities, as part of a broader effort to honor victims, understand wrongdoing, and prevent the recurrence of wrongdoing. Memorialization efforts contribute to democratic societies by providing a framework for debating the specific causes of, responsibility for, and present-day effects of the wrongs that are remembered.

‘IN SILENCE, WOUNDS DEEPEN’

Transitional justice processes are not entirely foreign to the United States. There are past and ongoing efforts on which the U.S. Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation could build.

For instance, the 1981 Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians was a national effort that focused on reparations for Japanese American relocation and incarceration during World War II. The Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Maine and the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission are examples of state-level efforts. At the city level, the Greensboro (N.C.) Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigated “the context, causes, sequence, and consequence” of the events surrounding Klan-related killings on Nov. 3, 1979.

While every country’s experience is unique, there are invaluable insights to be gained from the experiences of other countries and regions. Heeding those insights requires overcoming a common form of American exceptionalism that holds up the United States as only a model for others, and not the other way around.

Comparative experiences from other countries provide lessons of the importance of both local and national truth-seeking efforts. They underscore the importance of calibrating expectations appropriately for what any single truth commission or reparations program can achieve. Transformation does not occur overnight; it is a generational undertaking. Another key insight is that, given the ways religion and racial injustice are interwoven in the United States, churches and faith communities should be part of the process of transitional justice.

Whether looking at dictatorships in South America, genocide in Rwanda, apartheid in South Africa, or the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the story of religion

and its place in conflict, repression, and genocide is complex: It’s a story of religious actors who are implicated in, resistant to, victims of, and also perpetrators of political injustice. The Troubles in Northern Ireland fueled conflict between ethno-national communities aligned along religious lines (Catholic and Protestant). Catholic nuns and priests were implicated in the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsis. Catholic Archbishop Óscar Romero was assassinated by government operatives while saying Mass because of his commitment to documenting human rights abuses and speaking against violence during the civil war in El Salvador.

Religious leaders also lead and animate transitional justice efforts. Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu was chair of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In Guatemala, Bishop Juan Gerardi formed a truth commission, while in East Timor Catholic Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo played a central role in calls for reconciliation.

Transitional justice is also useful as a lens for critically evaluating the complicity of religion in upholding racial injustice in the United States. The South African truth process provides a model for the form such critical evaluation might take. While most truth commissions have not focused specifically on the complicity of faith communities in injustice, the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) did. As part of its process, the TRC held special hearings on the role of faith communities (ranging from African Traditional Religion to numerous strands of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Baha’i) in both supporting and resisting apartheid.

Faith communities were asked to categorize themselves as “agents,” “victims,” and/or “opponents” of apartheid in their submissions to the TRC. Agents of apartheid reflected on how “the system of apartheid was regarded as stemming from the mission” of the church and how churches “gave the apartheid state tacit support, regarding it as a guarantor of Christian civilization” or, in the case of the Dutch Reformed Church, as required by the Bible, as prominent South African human rights leader Glenda Wildschut reports. They acknowledged the legitimizing role that church chaplains ministering to the South African Defense Forces played through their presence, and the ways in which white churches benefitted from apartheid, able to buy confiscated lands and buildings from Black congregations at reduced prices.

Other faith communities, including the South African Council of Churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples contested, resisted, and suffered under apartheid, according to the final South Africa truth commission report. Black South African religious communities who were victims of apartheid lost land through state confiscations, were forced to sell land at low prices under the Group Areas Act, and had religious activities disrupted, religious buildings bombed, and their leaders targeted for detention, phone tapping, torture, and in some cases murder.

In addition to being partners to and supporters of transitional justice processes that take up human rights abuses committed by state actors or with state complicity, the South Africa example indicates the vital importance of churches being open to interrogating their own roles, as agents or victims of injustice. Publicly documenting and officially acknowledging these roles can provide the foundation for churches to be partners in the broader pursuit of relational transformation in American society.

To be sure, the role of religion in American racial injustice is not entirely unknown. But knowing is not the same as formally and officially acknowledging. Part of what transitional justice does is counter the denial that enables silence about the past to persist and that undermines efforts to redress past and ongoing wrongs.

The centenary this past May of the 1921 white mob’s attack on the Greenwood district of Tulsa helps us remember Christian complicity. First Baptist Church in Tulsa has a prayer room set aside to “provide a place for our church and our community to explore the history of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 and to prayerfully oppose the sin of racism in our world, in our churches, and in our heart.” President Biden noted in his commemoration of the Tulsa attack, “Just because history is silent, it does not mean that it did not take place.”

Biden continued, “We can’t just choose what we want to know, and not what we should know. I come here to help fill the silence, because in silence wounds deepen.” ✱

Colleen Murphy is the Roger and Stephany Joslin Professor of Law at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the author of *The Conceptual Foundations of Transitional Justice* and *A Moral Theory of Political Reconciliation*.

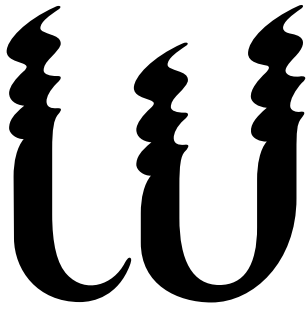


REWRITING THE SCRIPT

*Churches across North America
grapple with how they'll be different
in the post-quarantine era.*

By Christina Colón

*Illustration by
Nicolás Ortega*



When much of the United States was ordered into a lockdown last March, pastors followed suit, shutting the doors of their sanctuaries, parish halls, and classrooms. For many pastors, choosing to close was an easy decision to make in the moment. It was an act of love centered on the health and safety of their congregants.

But what came after was harder. While some churches had been offering online services for years, many did not have the technology in place to make a seamless switch. For weeks, I watched the pastors of my parent's church in Virginia pass a set of Apple AirPods back and forth while a church member propped an iPhone in place. And even those who were able to stream their services struggled with how to ensure certain members of their community were not left out. "We have so many people in our community who are in that 70-and-up range and for whom Sunday morning is the most life-giving part of their week," Rev. Nick Coates of Red Deer Lake United Church in Calgary, Alberta, said. "And they [didn't] have the ability to move online with us."

For others, the moment presented more than a technological challenge, stirring theological questions as to what worship even was without the physical incarnation of the church body. Who would we be after more than a year of doing communion "with apple juice and Ritz crackers?" Pastor Peter Chin of Rainier Avenue Church in Seattle wondered. Now, with mask mandates lifted and vaccination rates on the rise, that moment has arrived. And pastors have returned to their buildings only to be met with more questions than answers and wondering where we go from here.

HOW DO WE SHOW UP?

One thing is certain: "There will be no going back," Rev. Dr. Jonathan Chapman of Westfield United Church of Christ in

Killingly, Conn., said. "We all knew that things would be adapted, but I think that what we're realizing is that not only have the goalposts moved, but we're playing an entirely different game. We thought when we got to the other side of the pandemic, we would all have a little breathing room. I think there's a realization that we're only halfway there with what the implications are."

Chapman joined Westfield UCC as pastor eight years ago during a difficult time in the church's 300-year history. The largely politically purple congregation in a "blue collar town" had experienced a "remarkable revitalization" in the years leading up to the pandemic. Now, as the congregation returns to the church, Chapman

says he is slowing down, rethinking the priorities they once set, and taking time to redefine what "success" means beyond metrics. For Chapman, whose church "believes in the heavenly banquet being a potluck," that future hinges on coming together again—in person. Broadcasting worship is "a fine substitute," he said. "But it's only a substitute. I think our leaders, our congregations, our congregants have to make the case for being together, that we are better when we are together. That the spirit moves in a different way among us when we are together."

But Chapman cautions that coming together again is not an invitation to usher in the return of what was. "The shadow side of this pandemic is that I think it's

"Each generation is called to take what we've received from the past and to make it new, and to make it enthralling and compelling with God's help in this new time and place. That's a difficult task, especially when things are changing so fast. And each generation has its own different—and sometimes almost mutually contradictory—needs and expectations. It's complicated. I think the more that we can be nimble, smaller, and start to be more creative on the backend, the church is going to be healthier. It's hard to know what the church needs, what the world needs right now. It's hard to sustain hope. People in the church and the leaders are struggling with that. We're humans that have these spiritual longings—the need for God, the need to wrestle with life's great questions will always be there."

—REV. COLIN MATHEWSON

revealed a level of idolatry among our churches,” he said. “It’s revealed a level of doing just for the sake of doing. Of achieving just for the accolade. Of preparing and delivering, just to knock that out and make it happen.” Now is the moment for pastors to ask what Chapman referred to as the “harsh” questions: Why is your church still open? What’s the ministry you’re really doing? “Not accusingly,” Chapman said. “But I suspect that’s a question that’s been in the back of many pastors’ minds. The Catholic Church has largely consolidated parishes and there’s been a whole lot of reaction to that. And yet, from an administrative and a ministerial perspective, I can understand it. When we lift up the existence of our congregation, simply because they were, always have been, I think we are bowing before a false god. And so, I guess the second piece of that question is, *who are we worshiping?*”

Rev. Dr. Sidney S. Williams Jr., pastor of Bethel Church of Morristown in New Jersey, turned to the prophets for guidance. In the midst of the pandemic, Williams told *Sojourners*, the book of Amos—“where Amos basically said that God was not pleased with our worship services or our sacrifices”—really resonated. “For me, that was prophetic,” Williams said, especially “with the civil unrest, the death of George Floyd, and just the unresolved trauma of so many other names.”

Scripture revealed what Williams had been witnessing in the church long before the pandemic—a lack of relevance. “We’re not engaging in conversations and in civil action where we should,” he said. “We were kind of just doing a routine, you know, what we’ve always done.” The churches that will survive as we emerge from the pandemic are going to have to think beyond the script, Williams told *Sojourners*. “We’ve already demonstrated that the church doesn’t need the building,” he said. “It’s not the building that makes us relevant. It’s how we engage people in the midst of trauma, how we engage people who are looking for answers to some of life’s toughest questions.”

Now is the moment for pastors to be asking what Christ would say to the challenges of our day. “If we were to take the word of God seriously, what does it mean to say, ‘set the captives free?’” Williams asked. “How does that manifest itself in this issue of mass incarceration? What is good news to the poor with mass evictions on the rise, with people losing jobs and benefits, family instability, community

instability? What does it mean to be light and salt in a dark and tasteless world? And how do we show up? What’s our vocational identity now?”

TENDING TO THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

For Rev. Jane Gould of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Long Beach, Calif., and Pastor Cindy Lapp of Hyattsville Mennonite Church in Maryland, the forced move to virtual platforms presented opportunities for their congregations to reckon with racial injustice in ways they had not done while in their respective church buildings.

“You walk into most Episcopal churches—certainly ours—every image in every stained-glass window is white,” Gould, whose congregation worships in both

“I’ve been ordained in the Episcopal church [for] 35 years, and I didn’t imagine that we would have a moment while I was in active leadership where we really could push these boundaries. To be in a community that’s willing to engage feels like deep gospel work. To have large cohorts of people willing to name systems and structures as inherently flawed and, as they say about the carceral system, not broken, but working just as they’re supposed to is something I did not think I’d see. This has been an opportunity for a lot of us to go deeper and dream more for the church.”

—REV. JANE GOULD

English and Spanish, told *Sojourners*. “The church is very fixed and formal. With Zoom worship, we had the freedom to invite our friends from all over the country to preach for us.”

Following the murder of George Floyd, Gould’s church issued a pastoral letter on race that committed their parish to the work of deconstructing racism and named that while the Episcopal church had passed legislation at general conventions on racial reconciliation, very few people had actually done the work. “And so, we committed to doing it and we committed to claiming it as a mission priority for our entire congregation,” Gould said. For 10 weeks through the summer and fall, in lieu of the traditional epistle readings, congregants read letters to the church from the community—largely from

Black, Indigenous, and people of color and young adult members of the congregation. “Paul’s letters essentially talk about how the early Christians need to live into their calling as followers of Jesus Christ,” Gould said. “Ours was how do we *in this moment* live into our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.” Seventy members signed up for an online affinity group called “My Work to Do” to engage in conversations surrounding racism, injustice, and reconciliation. Others participated in a program through the Episcopal Church called “Sacred Ground” to engage in film- and readings-based dialogues on race. In November, the church joined with LA

Voice, a multifaith advocacy organization, to encourage voter engagement and educate congregants on ballot propositions they saw as essential to caring for their community.

“Now, as we begin to reenter our building, we’re saying, ‘OK, so now that we come back together, how do we live into becoming beloved community?’” Gould said. “How do we do the work both within our community, but also in relationship to the neighborhood, state, and country around us?”

In Maryland, Lapp is facing similar questions as she considers welcoming congregants back to the church building.

“The twin pandemics of white supremacy and COVID-19 gave us a chance to really work at understanding whiteness and white supremacy and policing and prisons in a way that I don’t think would have happened if we were in person,” Lapp told *Sojourners*. “Really looking at white supremacy and whiteness has been impactful for us as a congregation, certainly for me as a pastor, and gives me some goals for the coming years to say, ‘OK, these are some things I want us to keep working on, and what could that look like? And how do we get more people involved in dismantling white supremacy?’”

WHERE WORSHIP TAKES PLACE

While some churches were making plans for how to safely reopen their doors, others were preparing for what happened when congregants didn’t—or couldn’t—return. “One of the big consequences of COVID-19 was place,” Pastor Chin of Seattle said. Not only did worshiping in “pajamas in a living room” impact people’s understanding of where worship could take place, he said, but people had to physically move because they couldn’t find work, needed to be closer to family, or found more affordable housing elsewhere.

While often necessary, the increased movement of people poses an ideological challenge for Chin’s church, which is a member of the Christian Community Development Association, a network of ministries committed to engaging the under-resourced communities in which they are located. “There is the paradigm, or the model, of being close to people and being rooted in a location for a long as you can. And then there’s the human reality of migration and change, change in employment, and gentrification, and all these kinds of psychosocial things that are also happening,” Chin said. “I think there’s going to come a reckoning between the Christian ideals of staying rooted in one place and the reality that very rarely do people stay rooted in one place.”

It’s a truth Rev. Colin Mathewson of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in San Diego, Calif., has been reckoning with for some time now. “Our biggest threat to our congregation is just the high price of housing in San Diego. We lose a few families each year to some other state where it’s cheaper to live,” said Mathewson, whose church consists largely of Congolese Americans and Sudanese Americans. During the pandemic, Mathewson’s

“It’s really going to take some courageous, innovative decisions and choices and convictions to move clergy beyond seeing their immediate needs and their immediate context to dreaming about what comes next, and not just for their own sake, but for the sake of the body of Christ. If we don’t jump ahead to the next season, how are we going to shepherd people into that season? If we’re still thinking 1990s and we’re in 2021, we’re going to be well behind in terms of our ability to help shepherd people to Jesus in a new kind of era. Do we have the courage to think forward, to help the church thrive in a very, very different world?”

—PASTOR PETER CHIN

"One of the things that I struggle with [is] trying to figure out how do we pass this faith tradition on to the next generation so that they understand that it's not about, at least for me, traditional evangelicism. It's not about recruiting more souls for Christ but recruiting more people to spread Christ's justice. What are other faith leaders doing to help people understand Jesus' message of justice and inclusion? And how do we help heal some of the pain the church has created? Because we've been so concerned about saving souls, but not bringing justice for bodies."

—PASTOR CINDY LAPP

church chose to convert their sanctuary into a learning pod where children from the neighborhood could come and receive meals and complete school assignments with the support of a tutor. "We have a lot of English language learners, some newly arrived refugees, and kids who are already struggling a lot with school," he said. "The fact that it could take place in the sanctuary just felt that much more of a blessing for all of us."

Now that children are returning to school, Mathewson said the church is coming up with ways to ensure families have the economic means to stay in the community post-pandemic, including starting a catering social enterprise to provide job opportunities and income. "My hope is that we find ways that people can really find a more stable financial

situation and care better for their families [and] deepen their relationship with God because they're focusing a little less on surviving and more on thriving," he said.

Like Mathewson, Chin is also preparing for the future church—one he recognizes will continue to be impacted by gentrification long after the pandemic breaks. In 2019, a national study ranked Seattle third in a list of the most quickly gentrifying cities in the U.S. And it's not just housing that's expensive, a story by *The Seattle Times* stated. Groceries, transportation, health care, and other goods are 9 percent to 40 percent more expensive in Seattle than the national average. "It's one thing when you're trying to stay in a poor community. It's another thing when you're trying to stay in what's becoming a rich community," Chin told *Sojourners*. "That's going to have

to be a reckoning for Christians who love communities, who want to be invested. How do we create some framework for us to make sense of migration, of change, of pandemic, of how fluid places [have become due to] remote working, and learning, and all these different things?"

DO WE NEED SUNDAY MORNING?

Rev. Coates in Calgary has decided he isn't going to spend his time post-pandemic trying to get people to return to the church on Sunday mornings. Instead, Coates said he is thinking of ways his church can "decentralize Sunday," ensuring the congregation is investing energy in things that are just as important as their Sunday convenings, such as justice initiatives and social gatherings. "We're really excited to begin to see how Sunday morning just ceases to be or becomes one thing among many, instead of the most important thing that we do," Coates told *Sojourners*.

But rethinking Sunday is just part of a larger discernment that Coates hopes the global church will engage in rather than rushing back to the way things were before the pandemic. "If the pandemic lasted like two months, we'd just go back to what we always did," he said. "But people have grieved what they knew long enough to where we actually have the opportunity now to have something new rise up."

Coates envisions a collective church body that is more collaborative than territorial; more focused on sharing resources than retaining members; and more attuned to what's happening in the community than just inside the church walls. "Maybe," he said. "We can not only reimagine church but reimagine worship and spiritual practices, and have a whole new rejuvenation of what it means to be humans."

If the pandemic showed us anything, it's that people can worship from anywhere, in anything, with anything—even apple juice and Ritz crackers. Why then should the future church not be the same? As we reemerge, pastors face a moment, as Coates said, to "practice that resurrection," to find innovative and impactful ways to be the church in their communities. We can lament and grieve what was lost, Coates affirmed, "But can we also make room for something new?" ✪

Christina Colón is an associate editor of *Sojourners*.

Building the Beloved Community

Virtual and in-person events this fall



Rev. Adam Russell Taylor is president of Sojourners and author of *A More Perfect Union: A New Vision for Building the Beloved Community*, available Sept. 14. As a recognized leader in addressing a range of peace and justice issues, he can speak on global human rights, faith and politics, faith-inspired activism, and racial and economic justice.

Register to attend an event or invite Adam to speak to your group at sojo.net/events.



SOJOURNERS

SARAH WELCH-LARSON HAS SEEN ALL SIX *ALIEN* FILMS. THERE'S A LOT IN THEM FOR XENOMORPHS—AND HUMANS—TO CHEW ON.



W

When author and film critic Sarah Welch-Larson was growing up, she wasn't a horror movie fan. That started to change when, as a teenager, she had a fateful encounter with the James Cameron film *Aliens* on cable TV.

Film

The movie's hero, Ellen Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver, "looked a lot like my mom and had a lot of the attitudes my mom has about some things," Welch-Larson, who writes about faith and popular culture for the

online publications Think Christian and Bright Wall/Dark Room, told *Sojourners*. "I was captivated by that character." Two weeks later, Welch-Larson watched the first 1979 *Alien* movie, directed by Ridley Scott. It frightened her and she couldn't get it out of her head.

Eventually Welch-Larson's interest grew into a fascination with the series as



a whole. Her new book, *Becoming Alien: The Beginning and End of Evil in Science Fiction's Most Idiosyncratic Film Franchise*, looks at recurring themes of evil, greed, and destruction in the *Alien* films through the lens of theologian Catherine Keller's 2002 book, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, in which Keller examines the first two verses of Genesis.

"She writes a lot about God setting everything into relationship with each other. God's saying there's a relationship you have with the rest of the world and with other created beings around you," Welch-Larson explains. "Once you start to deny those relationships, you're saying they're not as important as what God has created you to be, and Keller says that's the source of evil."

Welch-Larson says this idea—that sin stems from a denial of our emotional connection and responsibility to the world around us—is a perfect fit for the *Alien* films. "Once people start to deny the inner humanity of each other, that's when things go wrong," Welch-Larson says. "That's why Weyland-Yutani [a fictional corporation central to the series] is willing to send these characters to their deaths in the first movie, and things spiral out of control from there."

***Alien* and beyond**

The *Alien* series consists of six movies in total. Four of them—*Alien*, *Aliens*, *Alien 3*, and *Alien: Resurrection*, often referred to as the *Alien* quadrilogy—focus on Ellen Ripley as she battles parasitic, acid-blooded space creatures sometimes called xenomorphs. The other two films are prequels on the aliens' origins and the factors that set the first *Alien* film in motion.

Each of the quadrilogy movies is helmed by a different director and has a unique approach to the series' central themes of corporate dehumanization and capitalist exploitation. Scott's *Alien* is a paranoid science fiction horror story following Ripley and the crew of the *Nostromo*, a commercial towing spaceship, as they're pulled from

hypersleep to investigate a distress signal on a nearby moon.

The moon, LV-426, is home to eggs containing face-hugging aliens, one of which attaches itself to a crew member of the *Nostromo* and implants him with an alien spawn. The alien hatches, killing its host, and quickly grows into a full-fledged monster with dripping metallic jaws that kills off the crew one by one. Ripley escapes, but not before discovering that the company she works for, Weyland-Yutani, intended for the *Nostromo* crew to find and bring back the xenomorph (regardless of the cost to their lives) so that the company could examine the specimen.

Cameron takes over directing duties from Scott for *Aliens*, an action thriller set 57 years after *Alien*. Ripley's escape pod, where she's lying in stasis, is picked up by Weyland-Yutani. When the company loses contact with a terraforming colony located on LV-426, Ripley accompanies a corporate representative and a troop of colonial marines to investigate. The cause of the trouble is another alien, and it's up to Ripley to keep it from killing everyone. Once more, it's revealed that Weyland-Yutani wanted to save the alien for the purpose of military research.

David Fincher directs *Alien 3*, the bleakest of the quadrilogy. After Ripley and a small group of survivors destroy the xenomorph at the end of *Aliens*, their escape pod crash-lands on a prison planet. Ripley is the lone survivor of the crash, along with another alien organism. While the other films are notably less concerned with Ripley's gender identity, Welch-Larson says *Alien 3* is explicit in its feminist themes.

"It's exploring the idea of what it's like to be in a woman's body in a world exclusively built for men, and seeing what traps of sin the men fall into because they've fallen for the lie that they're no better than the sins they've committed," Welch-Larson says.

Ripley dies at the end of *Alien 3* but returns in clone form for Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien: Resurrection*, set 200 years after *Alien 3*. The military creates this version of Ripley, whose body also hosts an alien queen and shares DNA with the creature. The military removes the queen from Ripley's body and uses it to breed additional aliens. After the aliens

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**CATHERINE KELLER'S
IDEA THAT SIN
STEMS FROM A
DENIAL OF OUR
RESPONSIBILITY
TO THE WORLD
AROUND US IS A
PERFECT FIT FOR
THE ALIEN FILMS.**



BREAKING EXPECTATIONS

By Abby Olcese

N

No matter your racial, ethnic, spiritual, or geographic background, or where you fall on the gender spectrum, a vital part of adulthood is determining your identity—particularly in relationship to the community you grew up in. At some point, we all diverge from others' opinions of us.

Hopefully, we also find people who help us in our quest to define ourselves.

The Peacock series *We Are Lady Parts*, about an all-female, Muslim punk band, shows a group of characters who support each other on their individual journeys of identity, with their religion and larger community playing central roles. The series, created and written by Nida Manzoor, presents a diverse look at modern-day Muslim womanhood. Its themes also carry over into the broader experience of maturing alongside your faith, and what happens when your expression of belief conflicts with cultural expectations.

Lady Parts is fronted by the fierce feminist Saira (Sarah Kameela Impey). Earthy mom Bisma (Faith Omole) plays bass, and aggressive Ayesha (Juliette Motamed) is on drums. Momtaz (Lucie Shorthouse), often shown vaping through her niqab, is their manager. Saira decides the band needs a lead guitarist, eventually selecting Amina (Anjana Vasan), a painfully shy, tightly wound Ph.D. student.

Amina is the show's main focus. Initially, she's more interested in finding a husband than singing punk anthems like "Voldemort Under My Headscarf." Her favorite artist is Don McLean, not Bikini Kill. The bigger problem, though, is her stage fright. Amina is talented, but put her in front of a crowd and, in her mom's words, "her nervy disposition induces diarrhea and vomiting." However,

Amina is determined not to let her bandmates down, even when it means defying the expectations of her conservative, overbearing best friend Noor (Aiysha Hart).

Amina is emboldened by Lady Parts' approach to Islam. She dresses in subdued pastels; they wear bold colors, band shirts, and flannel. Amina is soft-spoken and demure; these women curse with abandon, smoke marijuana, and talk about sex. Bisma's husband supports her art. Saira has commitment issues. Ayesha comes out as gay. These characters are also faithful in prayer, involved in their community, and devoted to each other. None of these factors are considered conflicts. When a journalist calls them "the bad girls of Islam," the band is infuriated: They aren't rebelling against their faith—their expression of it is just unorthodox.

We Are Lady Parts is delightful and funny, but its biggest triumph is a universal message that crosses cultural and religious barriers: Faith takes many forms. Your understanding of it may be different from your neighbor's, but the feelings and experiences that inform your beliefs are nonetheless valid. Community and supportive relationships help us make our faith our own. ♦

Abby Olcese (@abbyolcese) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.

TREE RINGS

The three short films in *The Trees Remember* series span 60 years and feature Black women in the outdoors, reframing narrow historical narratives of who has access to nature. Directed by Angela Tucker, they portray memory, relationships, and belonging in the outdoors.

TuckerGurl Inc.



Unique Pathways

On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity chronicles author Daniel Bowman Jr.'s life as an autistic Christian, starting from his unexpected diagnosis at 35. Illuminating the ways that neurodiversity enriches us all, this book debunks misconceptions and offers hope.

Brazos Press



Mandemic

Christina Sweeney-Baird's dystopian debut novel *The End of Men* centers on a plague—but only men become infected. As the presence of men wanes, women are left to reckon with what the world will be like without them.

G.P. Putnam's Sons

THE IMPETUS OF THE EARTH

By Faith-Marie
Zamblé



Curated

Nearly everyone I know is moving. Homes that were once beloved, or at least tolerable, now represent forced encampment. Like rats departing a sinking ship, many of us are running

from the wreckage of 2020 with little more than the clothes on our backs and enough money for a security deposit. Change is in the air. Yet, as the adage goes, “The more things change ...” Cells renew, but bones remain.

The image on a postcard on my desk, taken by the infamous Carl Van Vechten, is Georgia O’Keeffe next to one of her iconic cow skulls. Her eyes are closed as she cradles the skull in her hand and leans her head against it. The gesture, almost reverent in its grace, seems to acknowledge the animal who once was. The picture is a study in contrast, much like O’Keeffe’s life. According to the postcard, the photo was captured at O’Keeffe’s New York penthouse in 1936. By this point, she’d already made her first pilgrimages to the American Southwest, a region that would provide her with artistic inspiration until her death in 1986. It was also a refuge from the stress of her marriage to the influential photographer and philanderer Alfred Stieglitz. Maybe it’s fitting then that one of the few O’Keeffe pieces I’ve seen in person is related to her attempts to find sanctuary.

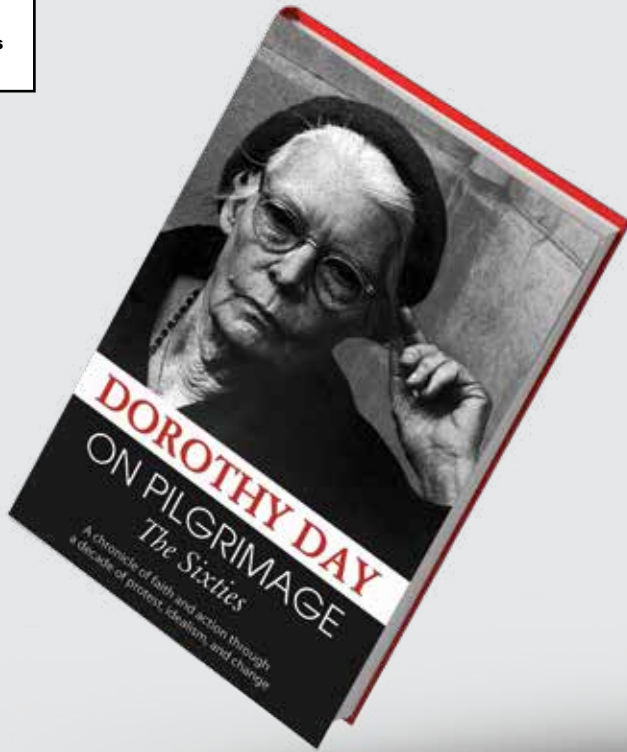
Titled “Sky above Clouds IV,” the painting lives in all its 8-by-24-foot glory at the Art Institute of Chicago. It is primarily composed of, as its title suggests, clouds—clouds O’Keeffe saw as she sojourned across the sky via plane. “Sky above Clouds IV” has mesmerized me throughout the years,

**THERE IS SO MUCH TO SAY ABOUT
GEORGIA O’KEEFFE’S EXPLORATION
OF TEMPORALITY.**

largely because it is inescapable. Its ambitious scale invites viewers to sit in an existential space that is ill-defined yet luminous and expansive. Your eyes ride the line of O’Keeffe’s ever-unfolding peach horizon. Time ceases to exist. Perhaps this holding pattern, this sacred spiral, is the present, in which fantasy and reality meet. It could also be a metaphor for the way time functions in nature—quietly, gently, and with little regard for our own schedules or opinions. Although many define O’Keeffe’s work by its latent eroticism, there is so much to say about her exploration of temporality, i.e., the presence of the cosmic and the mundane as sites of renewal and transformation.

I’ve been thinking a lot about John McPhee’s concept of “deep time.” Deep time names geologic time (the assemblage of rock formations, for example) as a way of understanding cycles of nature. These cycles are slower and, in some ways, surer than that of human industrialization. However, an endless line of sky, an animate person holding a relic of death, even a new home can be traced to the impetus of the earth to alter and grow. In O’Keeffe’s work, there is no later, only now. And in the now, the well of enormous time that waters everything, there is room for grief and change and new beginnings. ✱

Faith-Marie Zamblé is an artist, writer, and M.F.A. candidate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the Yale School of Drama.



**DAY DIDN'T COMPARTMENTALIZE
HER LIFE INTO THE SPIRITUAL
AND THE POLITICAL.**

that the latter are fueled by an out-of-control U.S. military whose expenditures rob the poor.

Coming in for special notice are prisoners of conscience, Day's colleagues who are imprisoned for resisting the draft that fueled the Vietnam War, including, in 1968, burning draft files in Catonsville, Md., and Milwaukee, in nonviolent destruction of what Jesuit priest Dan Berrigan called "improper property." These nonviolent trespasses against the law by the anti-war and civil rights movements were in obedience to God's laws. After several good recent biographies of Day, reading again the words that first introduced me to the Catholic Worker movement brought back memories of those days when Day helped so many commit to nonviolence as a way to make a world where, as her mentor Peter Maurin would say, "it's easier for people to be good."

Also receiving attention in this anthology are Day's visits to Rome to fast for a strong peace message in the documents of Vatican II, a trip to London, and, most interestingly, a trip to Cuba. In late 1962, Day devoted four columns to her visit, worrying that people might think she saw only

what she wanted to see, or what the revolutionary government wanted her to see. She explains that once she had been schooled in seeing Christ in the most destitute of New York's Bowery, it was easy to find "that which is of God in everyone." She admits that Cuba is "an armed camp" and says she remains as opposed to war and capital punishment as ever, but prays the grace of God will grow in Castro and that the church in Cuba will be free to function.

When reading her monthly columns, we realize Day didn't compartmentalize her life into the spiritual and the political. Her spirituality flooded into all of life, uniting it under the command of love. Don't dive into this book as one does a novel. Read it slowly, musing on an essay for a week, with a pencil in hand. For Day challenges us to make the connections between a spirituality of love for God and a love for all. ✕

Rosalie G. Riegler is a Catholic Worker oral historian and the author of *Dorothy Day: Portraits by Those Who Knew Her*.

CONSCIENCE AND HOSPITALITY

On Pilgrimage: The Sixties,
by Dorothy Day
Orbis

Love is laced liberally through this compendium, skillfully edited by Robert Ellsberg, of Dorothy Day's monthly columns from *The Catholic Worker*, the newspaper of the movement Day co-founded. Love for God, especially as it lives in the poor whose burdens of poverty she tried to share, shines through Day's accounts of her travels and her life at the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality in New York and the community's farms. Seeing examples of living love seems even more important today as our country faces the same problems as in the '60s: racism, poverty in a land of plenty, and endless wars that consume needed resources.

Day writes of these issues, but love as lived through acts of mercy is what unites the essays. She describes Catholic Worker houses of hospitality across the country where, daily, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the dead are mourned and buried, and the sick and the imprisoned are visited. In these essays, these acts are presented in opposition to works of war and racism. She documents

NEVER
LIMITED

Until This Shakes Apart,
by Five Iron Frenzy
Five Iron Frenzy



U

Upbeats and Beatdowns, the first album by the Denver-based band Five Iron Frenzy, opens with a song about the evil of manifest destiny and the genocide of Native people. In the second song, the protagonist gives all his money to a homeless man. The fourth track is about refusing to pledge allegiance to the American flag.

This was in 1996. On an album sold primarily in Christian bookstores, by a band that played evangelical church basements.

Five Iron Frenzy is still making music and, earlier this year, put out the most caustically political album of their career, *Until This Shakes Apart*. Released days after the Capitol insurrection, the album pulls no punches in its criticism of evangelicals' embrace of Trumpian politics. And the band has never sounded better.

After their sloppy, fun ska-punk days in the '90s and their hit-and-miss, genre-hopping experiments in the early 2000s, the band broke up, reformed in 2011, and released the mature and muscular *Engine of a Million Plots* in 2013. Rejoined with songwriter Scott Kerr (who had left the band in 1998), the band found new purpose and energy as its songs became more introspective. The result was a record more in the vein of Jimmy Eat World than third-wave ska, ending with a song about uncertainty and hope rather than their previous, hymn-like closers. The band remains loud and dark, but *Until This Shakes Apart* is more explicitly influenced by older forms of ska, like reggae and two-tone. And where *Engine of a Million Plots* was introspective, this album points the finger outward. No one is safe from singer Reese Roper's critique on this record, each song unleashing righteous anger at a different target: heartless immigration policy, gentrification of the band's hometown, the Confederate flag, oil profiteering, and so much more.

The radical theologian Ched Myers once gave the advice, "Have one foot in the church and one outside.

And keep your weight on the one outside."

Five Iron Frenzy has exemplified this for most of their career. They're a band clearly informed by a deeply held faith, but never limited to the insular Christian scene, playing shows with progressive organizations like Food Not Bombs and Ska Against Racism. Roper and saxophonist Leanor Ortega Till were founders of the punk-friendly Denver church Scum of the Earth, which still operates as an "outpost on the perimeter of the kingdom," according to its mission statement. Several members of the band are now atheists, but Five Iron Frenzy continues to operate as a radically inclusive democracy—every member of the band gets paid the same salary.

This inclusivity fuels the album's blistering punk closer, "Huerfano," which details incidents of childhood bullying (reportedly drawn from the band members' own experiences) before the soaring chorus declares, "Now fly you orphans / Here you belong / Welcome you wayward souls / Now lift your song." After decrying the tragic state of so much of American Christianity, it's a beautiful place to land: A reminder that no matter how messed up things are—as shouted in the background at one point in the track—"You belong!"

Joel Heng Hartse (joelhenghartse.com) is author of *Sects, Love, and Rock & Roll* and the forthcoming book of music criticism, *Dancing about Architecture is a Reasonable Thing to Do*.



cont'd from page 40 inevitably escape their enclosure, Ripley allies with a group of mercenaries to destroy the queen before the ship they're on reaches Earth.

Alien: Resurrection, with its darkly comic tone, is the odd one out in the series. Welch-Larson admits that it was the film she was least looking forward to writing about. However, in revisiting it, she found a surprising amount of thematic weight. "I think it's actually the longest chapter in the book, which shocked me," Welch-Larson says. "That movie was the most challenging and also the most rewarding to write about, because it was so surprising to me that there was so much depth to this movie that I'd written off."

In the prequels, Ridley Scott returns to the series he started, with new characters whose desire to push the boundaries of knowledge carries fatal consequences and leads to the events of *Alien*. Scott seemingly draws inspiration from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, particularly in the character of Michael Fassbender's David, an android who carries over between the two prequels and whose experiments ultimately create the xenomorph.

Welch-Larson says writing about the films has encouraged her to reexamine her preconceived notions about other films that may have more to offer than she initially thought. "It's made me wonder what other pieces of art we've discounted as a culture because they're genre films or horror films or pop art, or didn't do well at the box office," she says. "What other pieces of art are saying similar or totally different truths, because we think they're not worth anything?" ❖

Abby Olcese (@abbyolcese) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.



A SANCTUARY OF TREES, A SANCTUARY OF MERCY.

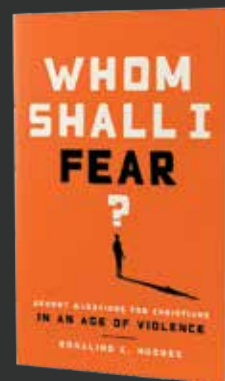


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THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP

By Bill Ayres



I've told you there are wolves out here.
 Don't you believe me?
 You could fall in a hole
 too deep to climb out of.
 You could slip on wet rocks
 and fall into the river and drown.
 Good thing I noticed
 your pink nose was missing.
 Good thing I turn around
 to check on what's behind me.
 Remember that leading the flock
 I look forward to find tender grass.
 I can't watch every lamb.
 Follow close like the others.
 On my shoulders you wiggle, you bleat
 you aren't hurt
 but I won't put you down
 knowing how you wander.
 Something wrong with these hooves
 that carry you left, right, left, left
 to the edge of the cliff
 overlooking the sea.

Bill Ayres taught Sunday school for children at Wycliffe Presbyterian Church in Virginia before the pandemic. His poetry collection is *What Passes for Wisdom*.



20
21

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Ephesians 3:20 NRSV

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GOD LOVES WITHOUT REASON

Scripture passages are
from the Revised Common
Lectionary, Cycle B

By Isaac S. Villegas



Living the Word

Most of the friends I grew up with in church youth group don't call themselves Christians anymore. They left church behind years ago. Yet here I am, still a very churchy Christian.

Why have I stayed in the faith after all these years? Why do we keep doing this Christian thing?

We are tempted to convince ourselves that God will reward our faithfulness with blessings—either in this life or the next. This is a Christian logic as old as the Bible, a theology taken from the lips of Jesus himself: “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:4). Prosperity theology isn't an aberration but a perennial Christian impulse, an urge within all of us as we try to justify to ourselves our faith.

This way of thinking about beliefs, according to Meister Eckhart, turns God into a cow. “People look upon God with the eyes with which they look upon a cow,” he preached in the 14th century. “To love God the way they love a cow, because it gives you milk and cheese. This is how people behave who want to love God because of external wealth or inner comfort ... they love their self-interest.”

This month's stories from Mark's gospel invite us into the disciples' struggle to understand why they've chosen to follow Jesus. Discipleship, we'll discover, is a constant exposure to the selfish motives for our faith as we stumble into God's truth—that, as Eckhart preached, “God loves us without a why.” God loves us without a reason, without making calculations. God loves us because God loves us.

Isaac S. Villegas is pastor of Chapel Hill (N.C.) Mennonite Fellowship and president of the governing board of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

**IN OUR ARROGANCE WE DENY
THAT EVERYTHING WE HAVE
COMES FROM GOD.**

SEPTEMBER 5

OUR BORROWED LIFE

ISAIAH 35:4-7; PSALM 146;

JAMES 2:1-17; MARK 7:24-37

A Gentile woman needs a miracle, so she comes to Jesus. “She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter” (Mark 7:26). Jesus replies, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs” (verse 27). She begs Jesus to heal her child, to liberate her from the oppression of a demon, and in response Jesus calls her a dog. This passage is as bad as it sounds. Jesus tells this woman that she—as a member of an unclean people—is like one of the scavenger animals in the streets.

Nevertheless, she persists, refusing his dismissal. “Lord,” she insists, “even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs” (verse 28). Her reasoning convinces Jesus that he has not yet grasped the reach of his ministry. “By reason of this logic [*logos* in Greek],” Jesus acknowledges her argument, “you should go because the demon has left your daughter” (verse 29, my translation). This encounter recasts Jesus' vision of who belongs with his people and to whom he belongs.

To borrow language from the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, this episode in Mark's gospel is “an epiphany of the face,” where a person “looks at me, calls out to me, claims me.” Jesus, face to face with this woman who presses him to recognize her claim on his care, reveals the interruption of another as the inbreaking of God's will, the gift of leadership opened up through the surprise of the uninvited.

We misrecognize others because we claim lordship over our corners of the world, filtering our experiences through the lens of possession, the disposition of ownership. We make claims on the world instead of opening our posture to receive the claims of others on us. In our arrogance we deny that everything we have, all of who we are, comes from God. To be a human creature, writes Kathryn Tanner in *Christ the Key*, is “to lead a continually borrowed life.” In other words, we are born beggars.

SEPTEMBER 12

PILGRIMAGE TO HUMANNESS

ISAIAH 50:4-9; PSALM 116:1-9;
JAMES 3:1-12; MARK 8:27-38

The narrator in Mark 8 calls Jesus “the Son of Man” and Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man” (see verses 31 and 38). Other translators write “the Human One,” because the whole point of the title is to declare that someone is a child of Adam and Eve, a member of the human family. New Testament scholar Joel Marcus lays out the exegetical rationale for this interpretation. “Jesus as Son of Man,” he explains, “presents a glorified picture of human destiny, showing humanity eschatologically transformed to fulfill the destiny God intended.” In other words, Jesus is a human being like us, and in his life we discover who we’ve been created to be.

The incarnation is a vision of the good life. Jesus teaches his disciples how to be a human being who is filled with God—a human life overflowing with God’s love. Mark begins his gospel with the baptism of Jesus, where a voice from heaven declares that Jesus is “the Beloved” (1:11). Divine love has become human in Jesus. His life will reveal the path of love incarnate in the world.

Church life is how we organize ourselves as an everyday pilgrimage into the humanness of Jesus—in our rituals of worship and fellowship. We become the body of Christ as we share our lives, as we offer each other the companionship of God’s incarnate love. Life together “is the radical exploration of what it is to be human,” writes Dominican priest Herbert McCabe. “To live in community ... is the exploration of God.” The Christian faith is an invitation to grow closer to God as we live into the humanity of Jesus.

SEPTEMBER 19

FIRST AND LAST

JEREMIAH 11:18-20; PSALM 54;
JAMES 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8A; MARK 9:30-37

The disciples have given up everything to follow Jesus. And they wonder if this life with him will be worth the sacrifices. When the kingdom comes, obviously Jesus will

appoint them to leadership positions, so they bicker. Jesus overhears the dispute and says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Their deliberations, their calculations are confounded by his comment. No one wants to be last, unless that means they’d be awarded with being first—but to strive for last as a tactic to achieve first place would betray a disciple’s selfish ambition, a desire Jesus won’t tolerate in his community. Their arguments unravel.

Jesus turns his friends away from their obsessions with greatness, with climbing into the echelons of authority, power, recognition. He gestures to the children in the streets as the ones who hold the keys to the kingdom: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (verse 37). This is not a call for family values or a plea to prioritize our children. There’s nothing of modern sentimentalism regarding childhood. Instead, as the biblical scholar Ched Myers explains in *Binding the Strong Man*, “Children represented the bottom of the social and economic scale in terms of status and rights in the ancient Mediterranean world.” Myers notes the astonishing fact in this story “that Jesus draws attention to children at all, for they were considered nonentities.”

When I read this story about the child in Jesus’ arms, I thought of the kids I saw this summer in Tijuana, Mexico, as my car inched to the border crossing, on my way into the United States. Young children—5 or 6 years old—sold gum and begged for change, trying to survive in an economy decimated by the border wall and the politics of exclusion. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” First, of course, we’ll have to tear down that wall.

**NO ONE HAS
PROPRIETARY RIGHTS
ON THE
KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.**

SEPTEMBER 26

ALL CAN DO GOD’S WORK

NUMBERS 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; PSALM
19:7-14; JAMES 5:13-20; MARK 9:38-50

John and the rest of the disciples seem to think that they’re the only ones in town with access to the power of Jesus. “Teacher,” John says, “we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us” (Mark 9:38). Included in the job description for discipleship, he assumes, is the task of being ministry police. John believes that Jesus “belongs” to the disciples, thus they should have the corner on the market for administering the kingdom of God on earth. If Jesus has entrusted his ministry to the disciples, then people beyond their circle who use Jesus’ name and cast out demons are competitors and rivals. Ministry, according to John, involves an adversarial posture toward others.

Jesus replies with a word of judgment. “Whoever is not against us is for us” (verse 40). God’s power is not a possession. No one has proprietary rights on the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus confuses our thinking about God’s presence in the world. He shifts our attention away from competition and toward the work that needs to be done, work anyone can do. We need all the help we can get, because the demonic ravages our world—forces of evil that ransack the goodness of God, that wreck the wonders of creation.

To work against a society, an economy, a culture that produces such demons requires all the allies we can find. “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Jesus calls us to resist forces of destruction alongside anyone, regardless of who they claim to follow. No time for jealousy. No room for pride. This struggle for healing and justice requires solidarities that reach beyond our communities. To give ourselves to God’s movement involves the formation of coalitions across differences and identities. ✱

“Living the Word” reflections for October can be found at sojo.net/magazine. “Preaching the Word,” Sojourners’ online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

Guest H'rumpus



AN IMAGINED CONVERSATION BETWEEN JEFF BEZOS AND WENDELL BERRY

By Jenna Barnett

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos arrived at writer Wendell Berry's home in Kentucky the same way he arrives anywhere on earth: by drone, covered in cardboard. When he stepped out of the large box, the two men shook hands and exchanged gifts. Bezos gave Berry a single octopus tentacle wrapped in burlap. Berry offered Bezos a gooseberry coated in local honey. Both quietly hoped the exchange was a step forward for modern masculinity. It wasn't.

Bezos: This is a fabulous berry, Wendell. Do you live off the food you farm? Or book sales?

Berry: Well, tax-evading corporate conglomerates have made it harder for authors to earn a sustainable living, but I'm happy with my lifestyle.

Bezos: So, you have other investments?

Berry: I invest in sequoias and in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years.

Bezos: I LOVE hummus. But I'm not familiar with Sequoia. Has their stock gone public?

Berry: They are trees. Very old trees.

Bezos: Oh.

Berry: I also invest during the summer by doing a fair amount of canning.

Bezos: Ah, yes, I can people all the time. People who unionize. Workers who don't like to wear diapers or pee in empty water bottles—

Berry: I was actually talking about peaches and sauerkraut.

Bezos: Of course, of course! I'll be eating that sort of astronaut food on my rocket ship. It's also very possible that I'll be drinking my own piss—filtered into electrolyte-rich water, of course. I'm hoping this'll help me connect with my employees.

Berry: Mr. Beelzebub—

Bezos: It's "Bezos," not "Beelzebub"—a common mistake.

Berry: Apologies! So, you're going to *outer space* to connect with your underpaid and overworked employees?

Bezos: Well, that's not the only reason. I'm going because it's been a dream of mine since I was a child and because space helmets fit so easily over my moist, reflective scalp. But mainly, I'm going out there to find myself.

Berry: I don't really try to find myself. I try to lose myself.

Bezos: Oh, I hate losing.

Berry: I have lost myself to the love of one woman and to the peace of the wild things. I have lost parts of myself so that I could become something less singular and more connected to the whole. That's why I still use a composting toilet. The poetry of it. That and the fertility of the soil.

Bezos: Wendell, I never thought we'd spend so much time talking about going to the restroom.

Berry: We don't have many other things in common, Mr. Buzz Lightyear.

Bezos: That's not my name.

Berry: Sorry, sorry. Mr. Buzzard, please continue.

Bezos: IT'S "BEZOS," and I'm starting to think you're messing up my name on purpose. I expected more from a wordsmith. You may not realize this, but we're actually both in the business of books. Amazon started out as a book-selling platform, ya know.

Berry: Have you ever read any of my books, Jeff?

Bezos: Yes. I've actually read *Where the Wild Things Are* cover-to-cover.

Berry: Gotcha. To be honest, when I received your assistant's letter, I thought I was meeting an environmentalist leader from Brazil to discuss the dangers of the world's shrinking carbon sink.

Bezos: I'm glad you brought this up. I wasn't gonna mention it, but given that you don't have a dishwasher, a larger sink really would be useful. I'll have one sent to you.

Berry: I'm talking about the Amazon rainforest.

Bezos: Right, right, right. Of course. It's probably best if I head out now.

Berry: Well then, Jeff, some parting words to help guide your journey home: "Be like the fox, who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction."

Bezos: Sorry, Wendell, but that might take more than two business days. ♦

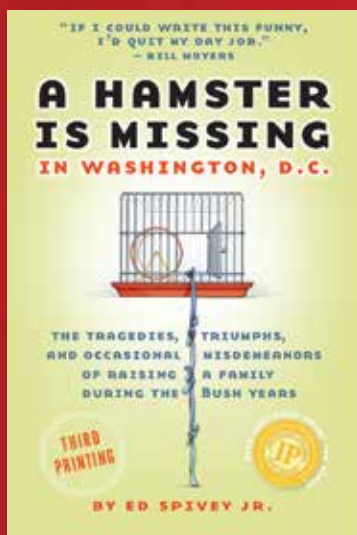
Jenna Barnett is associate culture editor, sojo.net.

Once in a generation a book shocks the literary world with its brilliance.

The wait is over. *Sojourners'* award-winning humorist Ed Spivey Jr. has just published his second book of columns and it's even longer than the first one! *Washingtonia* recounts what's happened in the nation's capital since 2010, and spares no one the scathing force of the author's legendary wit. (That's right, Mitch McConnell, be afraid.) But despite the traumas and debilitating crises during those long years, Ed dug deep and found the funny, even if people begged him not to.

His 2010 book, one of the few published that year with the word "hamster" in the title, won the Gold Medal Award for Humor from the Independent Book Publishers Association, and is now in its third printing.

Both are available at politics-prose.com.



This is not that book.

(But it's funnier.)

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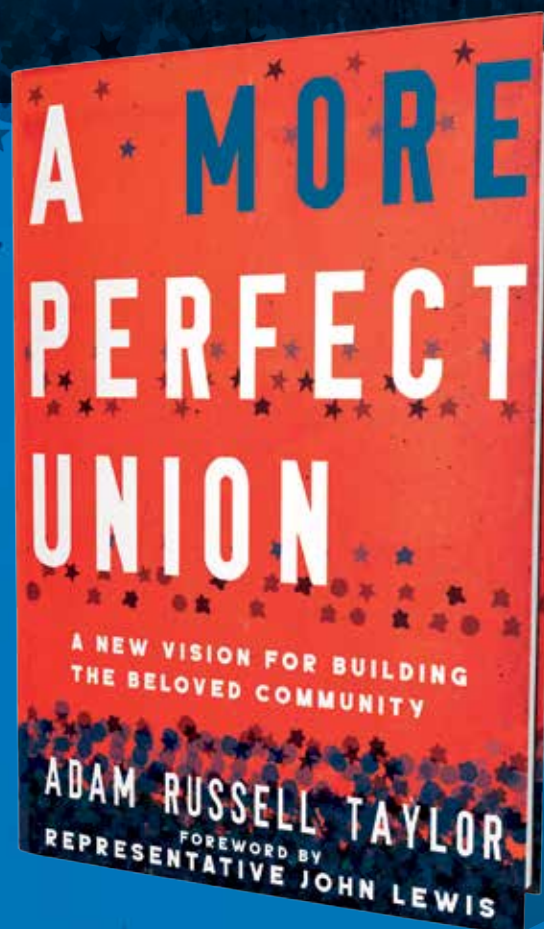
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—Jim Wallis, founder and ambassador of Sojourners,
and *New York Times* bestselling author

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